Dear Father

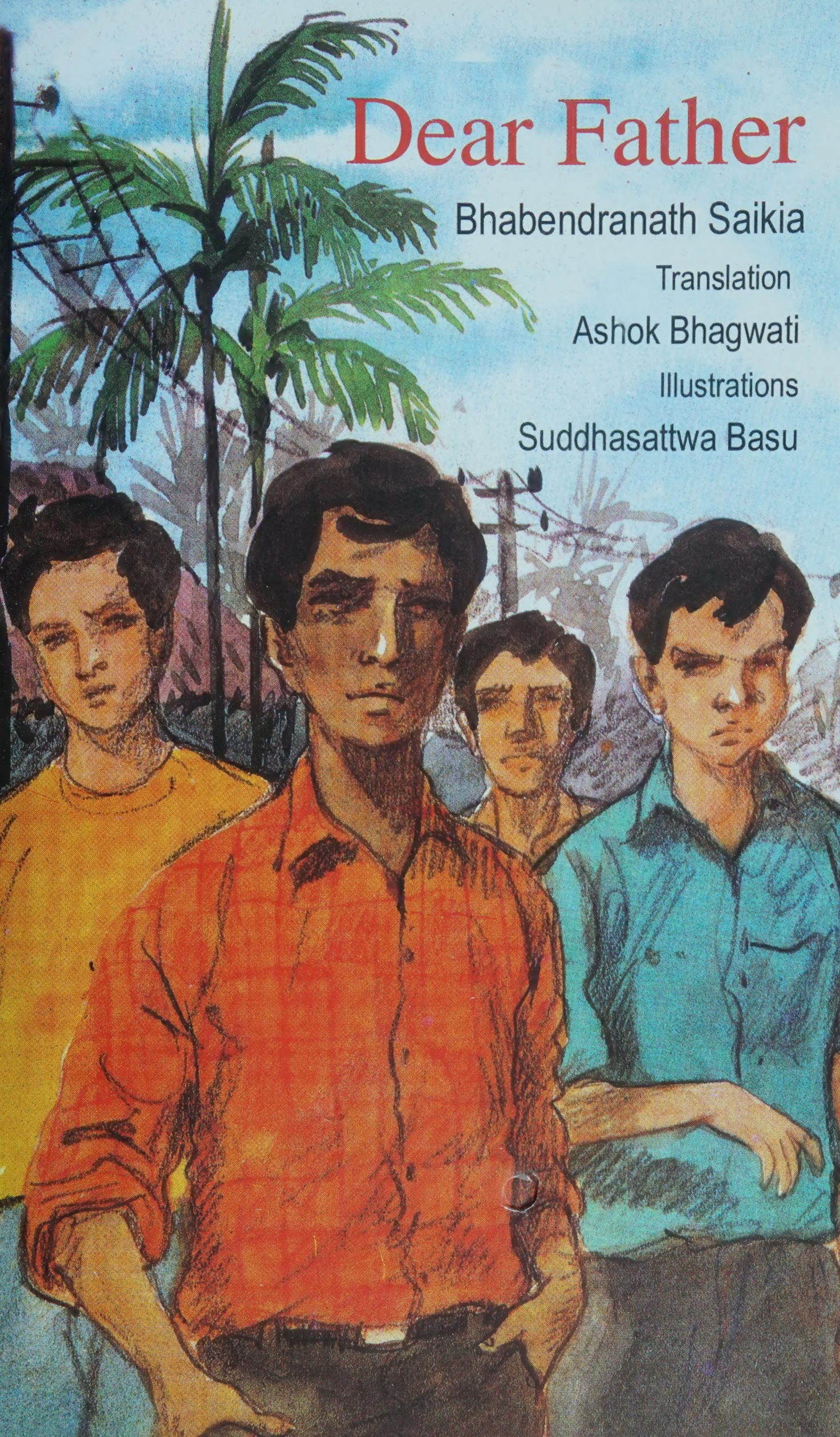
Bhabendranath Saikia

Translation

Ashok Bhagwati

Illustrations

Suddhasattwa Basu



Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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ONE

After Cutting the gourd into two pieces, Bipul's mother scooped out a bit of the pulp with the edge of the knife and placed it on the tip of her tongue. She bit it with her front teeth to find out if it tasted bitter. Sometimes, not always, a gourd turns out bitter, so she would usually taste the vegetable before cooking it.

This one was not bitter. Bipul's mother began to peel the gourd when she heard the shrill sound of something boiling and spilling over. It was the milk in the saucepan boiling over. Putting down the vegetable and knife, Bipul's mother ran towards the fireplace where a kerosene stove stood near the two hearths which were lit with firewood. She had left the milk on the stove.

Quickly she pulled down the handle of the stove to lower the burning wick. She blew on the boiling milk a few times and lowered the saucepan from the stove. Then blowing hard a couple of times at the burning flame, she extinguished the fire.

In one of the hearths a pot of dal was boiling. With a ladle she threw away some of the water from the dal. Then once again she started peeling the gourd.

Usually Bipul's mother did her work in a systematic manner but sometimes when she was in a hurry, she would forget things that needed immediate attention. Today for instance, while peeling the gourd, she was wondering what to cook for Bipul since he did not eat gourd. There was an egg which she could fry for him

but then her other children loved eggs too. She could not, she thought, give the egg only to Bipul and deprive the others. Perhaps she could cut the potatoes into fine pieces, mix it with the egg and give Bipul the larger share and the rest of it to the other. It was while she was preoccupied with all this that the milk had boiled over.

Bipul's mother picked up the knife again but remembering something else, she went out of the kitchen. Rani was studying; Rini was copying something from a notebook. Mukul was busy, removing some grass seeds which had got stuck to his trousers. This was his first pair of tousers and the seeds had got stuck to them when he was taking a short cut through the open space in front of Mohan's house. This happened every time he passed that way and he had set aside a particular time of the day to remove them.

As she walked past him, mother said, "Couldn't you find some other time to do this? Why don't you study now?"

She always gave him some such advice. Mukul did not reply.

Mother walked into Bipul's room and found that he was still sleeping. A little earlier, when she had gone to wake him up, she had removed the mosquito net from his bed. When she had tried to wake him up at that time, he had said, "I'll be up soon." But that was quite some time ago. In the meantime Mother and Rani had fried some suji or semolina, for breakfast and everyone had eaten except for Bipul. Putting aside his plate of breakfast, mother got busy with the lunch. The children went to work at their study tables. After finishing all this she found that Bipul had still not woken up. Earlier she had found him sleeping with his head hidden in the pillow and legs extended. Now he was

turned towards the wall, legs folded up and still fast asleep.

"Bipul, why don't you get up. It is going to be eight."

"What's the matter?" Bipul cried out hoarsely.

" I woke you up earlier, why did you go back to sleep? Have you any idea how late it is? Why don't you get up?" His mother said. Then she said gently, "Get up Baba."

"Don't disturb me, I' ll get up," growled Bipul in reply.

Mother again said entreatingly, "But when will you get up? It is time to get ready for school."

This time Bipul replied in a harsher tone, "I'll get up when I like. Let me sleep now."

For a while mother stood there, looking at Bipul whose back was turned towards her. Then quietly, she walked out of the room. When Bipul spoke in this manner she was afraid to speak to him. She did not know how he would react if she insisted on his waking up. As this was a busy time of the day for her, she went back to her cooking. The children had to be fed before they went to school since they did not come back for lunch. And Mukul had to be given some tiffin for his lunch break at school.

Rani was humming a tune and having her bath.

When Rani came out of the bathroom, Rini said, "Mukul you have your bath first then I'll have mine."

I don't want to bathe today,"Mukul replied.

Rani went to the outer verandah and cried, "Mother, Mukul says he won't have a bath. He said he'll just have a wash."

Mother was busy in the kitchen, frying some spices in a pan. "Why won't he have a bath?" She said. "Oh, Rini, please find out if Bipul has woken up?"

"Yes, he has,"

"Then why doesn't he come and have his breakfast?"

"He's gone out."

"Gone out! Why has he gone out now?"

Mother poured the boiling dal from a small brass vessel into the pan in which the spices were frying. Then she swished some water around in the vessel, poured it into the dal and stirred it. Then wiping her hands with the end of her sari, she came out of the kitchen.

"Where has he gone," she asked Rani anxiously.

Rani was combing her hair. "I don't know," she said. He never tells us where he goes. He must have gone to the panwallah's shop."

Why did he have to go out now? It's time to go to school."

Mother came out to the front verandah. Craning her neck as far as she could she looked up and down the road for him. Then leaning against a pillar, she stayed there.

Her head was reeling. "This boy would be the cause of endless pain," she said to herself. She saw Babul passing by. "Oh Babul," she cried. "Are you going towards the market?"

"Yes," said Babul. "I am going that way."

"If you see Bipul, please tell him that he must come home."

"Yes auntie, I'll tell him that," said Babul and went on his way.

Bipul's mother stayed there a while longer and then came inside quite upset. She looked at Bipul's study table and said to Rani, "Can you do some thing for me?"

"What?"

"I don't know where Bipul has gone or when he

will return but he mustn't miss school. He needn't have a bath. All he needs to do is eat something and go to school. Why don't you get together all the books he needs to take to school today. Please check his time table when you do that. That way he can still make it to school."

Rani realised that her mother was upset. At such times she felt unhappy too and would do anything to make her mother happy.

Hurriedly tying up her hair and arranging her own school books Rani went to Bipul's table. Where could he have kept his time table? Hunting through his books, she finally located it on the last page of one of his notebook. The cover was worn out and one could barely read the time table. That day, a Wednesday, he had Maths, English, and Geography.

Where were his Maths books? Here was an exercise book in which some sums had been written and then cancelled out. This must be the Maths book. But on the next page, she found the words of Hindi film song "Mehbooba-Mehbooba." Turning the pages of the unlabelled books, with great difficulty Rani was able to put together those that Bipul had to take to school that day. At the end of it she was uncertain that she had put together the right ones. Then asking her mother to serve her lunch, she hurriedly gulped it down.

Mukul usually went to school in a rickshaw with Gajen's brother Romen. Their families shared the fare. That day, the rickshaw came and Mukul went to school at the usual hour.

Rani would go to school with Sewali and Manna when they came to call out to her over the fence. Sofia, Kaberi and Jilmil would join them later. Sewali and Manna came that day at the usual hour and Rini went

to school with them.

As for Rani, whenever her friend Mrinalini did not turn up, she had no option but to go with her sister and the other younger children.

She was waiting that day for Mrinalini when Bipul walked in.

"Give me a glass of water," Bipul said in a commanding voice. Rani brought him the water.

Mother followed her and asked Bipul, "Aren't you going to school?"

Sipping his water Bipul walked to his study table. He did not bother to reply.

Mother asked again, "Where did you go? Do people go out so early in the morning without even having a cup of tea?"

Bipul remained silent and continued to drink his glass of water.

Mother said, "Go on, get ready quickly. You can still be in time for school, if you take the bike."

Finishing his glass of water, Bipul at last replied in a sonorous voice, "I won't go to school."

Raising his eyebrows, mother asked authoritatively, "Why not?"

Bipul went to put the glass on the table. When suddenly he stopped and cried out angrily, "Who's been tampering with my things?"

Mother and Rani were taken aback. Mother said, "I asked Rani to get your books together according to the time table as you were getting late."

"How dare she touch my books," cried Bipul at the top of his voice and threw the glass at Rani. Rani averted her head just in time and the glass hit the wall.

Mother's eyes blazed in anger. Clenching her teeth, she asked angrily, "Are you a devil?"

"Yes, I am a devil. How dare she touch my table?" Shouted Bipul in rage. He pulled hard at the corner of the table cloth and all the things on it toppled over.

With fear in her eyes Rani looked at her mother. Her eyes seemed to be entreating her not to say anything more to Bipul. His behaviour was really unpredictable. It was safer at such times to leave him alone.

Rani became anxious about her mother and did not want to leave her alone, although she wanted very much to go to school. Mrinalini had said the day before that she would tell her something important on the way to school. Rani was curious to know what it was.

Through the window, Rani could see Mrinalini on her way to school. She went out and told Mrinalini, "I won't be able to go to school today."

"Why not?" Asked Mrinalini with a note of surprise in her voice.

"He is in a frenzy," mumbled Rani incoherently, and she looked down as if in shame.

Mrinalini immediately understood what must have happened because Rani had over time, told her quite a lot about Bipul. Without saying anything more she walked on. A little later she started walking briskly. The school was a long way off and she had to find some other girl to give her company.

TWO

Rani went back indoors. Nervously she cast a glance at Bipul's room. Bipul had put on his trousers and was now putting on his belt.

Mother was leaning against the door of the kitchen, staring blankly. She looked at Rani and then slowly walked towards Bipul's room.

Bipul was combing his hair in front of a small mirror. With his left hand, he was trying to pat his hair into a more attractive style. For some time now, he had been trying to raise his hair in a wave over his forehead.

Standing by the door to Bipul's room, mother said to him softly, "You are dressed now, so why don't you go to school? If you go on your bicycle you won't be late."

Without saying a word to his mother Bipul threw the comb on the table and walked out of the room. He went towards the kitchen and standing in the dining area outside it, he looked all around. Then, getting rid of the lid that covered his plate of breakfast he gulped down its contents hungrily.

Mother came in and poured him a glass of water from the earthen pot. "Lunch is ready," she said. "Why don't you have some lunch as well?"

Bipul put down the saucer and wiped his face. Then he said, "Please give me five rupees."

"Five rupees?" Said Mother unable to understand

why he needed five rupees. When she knew that for snacks at school, he needed only one rupee. "Why do you need five rupees?" She asked.

'Didn't I tell you before I wasn't going to school," Bipul said in a harsh tone.

"Well, if you aren't going to school, then where are you going?"

"I can't tell you that. Give me the money."

"I can't give you the money just like that," Mother said sharply.

Often, because she was afraid of the tantrums, she would be quiet. At other times, she tried hard to be patient with him. But there was a limit to her patience. Now and then, she flared up when his behaviour became intolerable. How long could it go on? He did not bother about others at all. Would he hold the whole house to ransom?

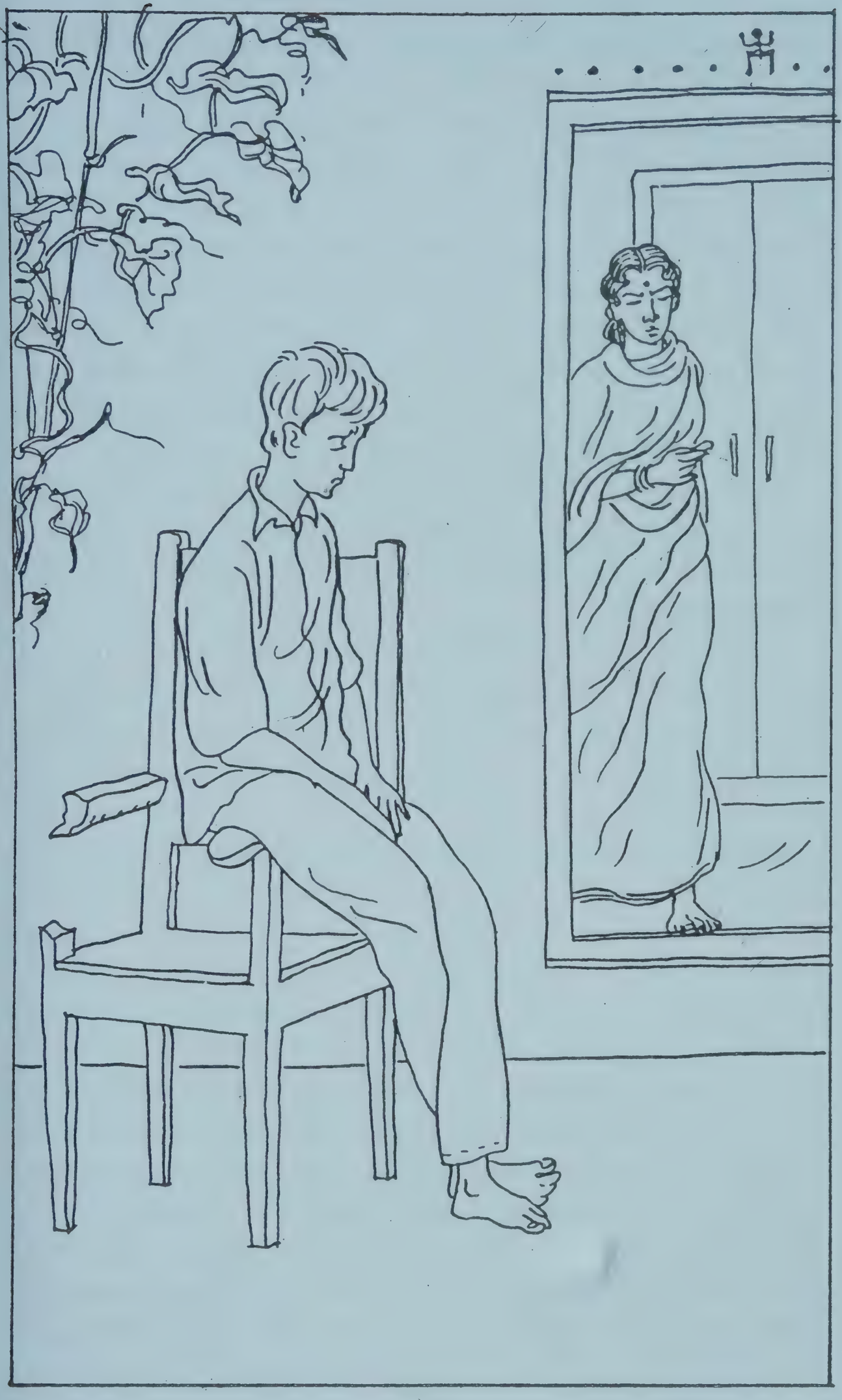
Bipul frowned at his mother. Then angrily he strode out of the kitchen and went into his mother's bedroom. Straight to her almirah. Seizing one of its handles he shook it but found it was locked.

Mother rushed to her room on hearing the sound. Pointing to the almirah, Bipul shouted, "I want the money."

Mother said angrily, "You will get what you want, but first get out of the room."

Mother used to hide the keys of the almirah in a secret place and she did not want Bipul to know where that was. That was why she had asked him to leave the room.

But Bipul would not leave. "First give me the money," he said. There was a limit to Mother's patience and she shouted "I said I would give you the money, whey don't you get out?"



Bipul was taken aback. He had not expected his mother to shout like that. He stared into his mother's eyes and then went out of the room.

Mother took the key from the hidden place and opened the almirah. She could not find a five rupee note in the little box where she kept her money. Taking out two notes of two rupee denomination and two fifty paise coins, she closed the almirah and looked for Bipul. He was sitting on the arm of a chair in a corner of the front parlour. Mother threw the money on the floor and said, "Go wherever you like. Today I will set fire to your books. You needn't go to school anymore."

She went straight to her bedroom after this. She sat on the bed for sometime, stupefied. Then she placed her head on the pillow and turning towards the wall began to sob.

In the meantime Rani was picking up the books which Bipul had thrown on the floor. She came out to look towards the road and saw Bipul going towards a point where four roads intersected. Then she went in and looked in on her mother. She knew that her mother would be lying down for a long time now. Once again she began to pick up Bipul's books. He had toppled everything over. Apart from books, there were so many odds and ends to pick up—a piece of an iron bangle, a pair of scissors with a broken tip, a screw driver, a dirty handkerchief, a small tin to keep negatives of films, a magnifying glass and two ballpoint pens without refills.

She spread the table cloth, arranged the things on it neatly, then changed her cloths as she was not going to school. She felt rather unhappy about missing school. Today Mr. Sharma was going to teach them something about land air and sea air and Madam Rajeena was to teach them a poem by Sarojini Naidu. Rani needed to

ask their maths teacher, Mr Khatoniar to explain a ratio and proportion sum. Nothing could be done now. Tomorrow everyone would ask her shy she had missed school and as always she would have to give some lame excuse such as - 'mother was sick,' or 'we had some guests.'

She did not know if mother had been able to finish her cooking. Rani went to the kitchen to do what remained to be done.

When it was past twelve, Rani went to her mother and said, "Please come for lunch."

Only after she had been called several times did her mother reply, "I'll eat later."

"It is already quite late," said Rani. Please get up. "Rani held her mother by the shoulders and tried to force her to get up. She knew that she had to do this or else her mother would not get up at all.

Mother continued to resist Rani. "I will eat later," she kept saying but Rani would not listen. She pulled her mother out of bed and after heating the dal, served her lunch.

While serving lunch, Rani kept saying, "He is a devil and so he will continue to misbehave. But why should you forego your food for that reason? Will he behave better if you don't eat? I can understand the situation somewhat, but how would Rini and Mukul feel when they discover that you have not eaten?"

Although Mother allowed herself to be persuaded to eat, she was too worried to eat well. After a few mouthfuls, she could not eat any more.

It was almost one o'clock. Bipul had left the house without eating lunch and he had still not returned. Where could he have gone? Would he come back for lunch? Should she have waited for him. She did not

know why he had taken five rupees. She wondered if he would bother to buy something to eat.

She said to Rani, "Please put aside some lunch for him in a plate so he can eat when he returns."

Rani flared up, "No I won't do it now. When he comes back and asks for lunch, I'll serve it to him."

Time passed. First Mukul came back, and then Rini. Rani served them lunch. Bipul's lunch remained in the pot. He had still not returned.

Mother went towards the gate again and again on the pretext of picking up some clothes which were drying on the outer fence.

Some times, she would go to the gate as if to check that it had been closed properly. Everytime she went out, she would stretch her neck and look up and down the road for Bipul.

All afternoon Rani kept saying that this time when her father came home she would tell him everything. She would ask him to go and see the Headmaster at Bipul's school so that the boy could be set right. She might even get Mrinalini's elder brother to teach that ruffian who was now a constant companion of Bipul a lesson or two.

But Rani was also anxious. Every now and then she looked at the road through the window. She did this mainly because of her mother who was very worried. She understood her anxiety as evening approached and her brother had still not returned. Once she asked Rini, "Did you see Bipul when you were returning from school?"

"No," replied Rini, "I didn't see him."

"Mukul, did you see him?"

"No, I didn't see him either," Mukul replied.

It was now evening. The streetlight was on the

point where the four roads met. As it became darker, one could not recognise the faces of the people in the street.

Every evening, either Mother, Rani or Rini would take an earthen pot of burning incense around the house to get rid of mosquitoes. The incense would be taken to all the rooms of the house as well as to the front and back verandah. But today, Mother was so anxious that she came out right upto the front gate with the earthen pot, looking for some sign of Bipul among the people in the street. The she went back inside.

She came out again to the front verandah and leaning against the pillar, kept looking towards the road.

She wondered if she should write a letter to Bipul's father the next day. Should she ask him to come home? Would it be proper to call him every now and then. He was a government servant and came home whenever there was a holiday. Sometimes he even took leave to come home.

If she wrote asking him to return now, he would assume that it must be Bipul again, causing trouble. Perhaps he got really unnerved when he received such letters. Would it be then worthwhile to bother him now? Rani's mother could not decide what to do.

THREE

Bipul's father worked in a small town in a mountainous area, three hundred kilometers from his home. Most of the houses there had been built on top of hillocks. Between these hillocks there were some level areas. But the town was surrounded by hills and forests through which narrow paths crisscrossed.

In the course of his work, Bipul's father had to travel to different places along these narrow paths. The government had given him a jeep but it was not possible to travel everywhere by jeep because in some places the roads were too narrow. So sometimes, he would leave his jeep behind and had to walk four or five hours to reach certain places. Those were very difficult days for him. On such days, he could not be sure of getting his meals in time and sometimes he had to forego his meals altogether. He would walk along the paths with a plastic water bottle slung around his neck. He would drink from it whenever he felt thirsty and fill it up again if he found a clear stream coming down from the hills.

If Bipul's mother or Rani were with him, they would certainly have packed some food for him—some vegetable with 'roti' or a fruit. But living three hundred kilometers away from home he had to take care of his needs himself. He had a Manipuri boy, who was about eighteen years old, but he was not of much use around the house. Even though the boy bad been cooking for him for two years, he still had no idea of the amount of water needed to cook rice. Very often he would add

too much salt to the vegetable or dal. Occasionally, when there was some good fish or deer meat, Bipul's father did the cooking himself, but on other days he left it to the young boy to do the cooking. He ate whatever was before him without complaining. Every morning he set out to work and he worked so hard throughout the day that by the evening he was too tired to bother about the cooking. After having a bath, he would stretch out on a reclining chair in the front verandah and put his legs up on a small table.

Resting in that position, he remembered his home, almost three hundred kilometers away. Why was he living alone in this forest? Why was he putting up with badly made food, with rice that was half-cooked. Wasn't it all for the sake of his family?

Whenever he thought of home, he became anxious about Bipul. What would he be doing at this moment? Was he at home now that it was evening? Was he at his desk doing his school work? His other children, Rani, Rini and Mukul were sometimes angry or sullen, but when you explained things to them, they understood But Bipul was so different. Why?

Whenever Father went home, it was usually evening by the time he got there. At that hour, he expected all his children to be at home. But Bipul was never there. Father would always take back presents for his children and the best of them was for Bipul. After tea and snacks and a chat with his children, he would go out to meet his neighbours. But his real reason for going out was to look for Bipul.

Why had the boy gone astray? Rani had said that it was because he was in the company of ruffians such as Kartik that he had gone astray. Otherwise, he would have remained a good boy. Could that be true? Well, it

could be! There were times when Bipul made him happy. Once, when he had gone home, he found Bipul tidying up his study table. He had even put covers on his books and continued studying till it was time for dinner. Father was so happy that he shared his joy with his wife and told her about his hopes and aspirations for Bipul. Father said :

"He isn't really a bad boy. If we could try to understand him, we might be able to guide him better. We mustn't scold him all the time. He may have his own point of view which we must learn to respect."

Next morning, Bipul told his father that he wanted a new pair of shoes and a belt. Father took him to the market that very evening. The shoe which Bipul chose cost Rs.230 and the belt, Rs.40.

This was way beyond their means but Father bought them anyway. Laughing all the time he said to Rani's mother, "Do you know how much my best pair of shoes cost when I was in college? Just eighteen rupees!"

The next time Father was at home, he learnt that Bipul had lost his belt. When Father questioned him Bipul said he did not remember where he had lost it. Then Mukul said that in the sportsfield he had seen Mayidul wearing the belt. When he asked Mayidul where he had got it from, Mayidul had replied, "Bipul sold it to me for ten rupees." When Bipul was asked about this, he slapped Mukul in the presence of his parents and then turned to leave the house to sort out matters with Mayidul at once. This made Father so angry that he shouted, "You cannot go out now. Stay right where you are."

Bipul was so taken aback by his father's anger that he stayed back. Father told him sternly, "Don't you leave

the house. Whatever enquiries have to be made, I'll make them myself."

A little later he heard Bipul telling Rani loudly, "It won't be such a good thing if Father goes to meet Mayidul."

Father had come home only for three days. As he was afraid that Bipul might create problems once he was away, he decided not to meet Mayidul nor did he mention the belt anymore.

Sitting alone in the verandah of his quarters, three hundred kilometers away from home, Father kept thinking about Bipul and wished he were back at home "How is it that his son had gone astray?" He wondered.

One day, while he was sitting in the same position thinking of home, Sadanand Datta who worked in the Excise department came to meet him. Sadanand Datta was one of the few people in the town who kept him company in his free time. He was much older than Bipul's father and was about to retire from service with a pension. In this small town he and Bipul's father had become constant companions. Sitting down in the chair near his friend, he asked, "What are you thinking about sitting here all alone?"

"I am just pondering over a personal problem," Bipul's father replied softly.

"What's the problem? You look very anxious," said Datta who had come over that evening to relax and talk light heartedly about things.

Bipul's father was sorry. He could not hide his feelings. He opened his heart out before his friend and gradually told him a great deal about his son. He told him how unhappy he was about his son's behaviour.

After he had listened to his friend Sadanand Datta remained silent for a while. Then he said in a serious

tone, "One doesn't know what to make of your son's behaviour. You are a decent person, you wife is gentle, your other children are well behaved. Then how has he gone astray? I know of another family which was faced with the same problem. Your son must be under the influence of an evil spirit just as their son was. Do you know what that family did to get rid of the evil spirit? Perhaps you have heard of that famous woman with spiritual powers—the blessed Mother Bhagavati of Polasani village. One day the family went to the village of Mother Bhagavati. Even before they could tell her of their problem, Mother Bhagavati already knew why they had come to her. Then she told them the remedy. A feast should be arranged for seven boys who were friends of their son and they should be fed to their heart's content. The boy himself should wear a red cloth and then he should be bathed with the waters brought from three different places. The flowers which the Mother gave in blessing should be placed below his pillow. The family followed the blessed Mother Bhagavati's instructions to the letter and believe it or not within a month that devil of a boy suddenly changed for the better. I have heard that now he is studying in Bangalore. I would strongly advise you to go to the blessed Mother too."

That night lying in bed before falling asleep, Bipul's father decided that he would also go to seek the blessings of the mother of Polasani village.

FOUR

For the past few days Bipul's mother had been wondering whether to write to her husband to come home for a few days. Maybe she could ask Rani to send a telegram to her father? Bipul had been behaving in such an outrageous manner that for many nights now she had not been able to sleep a wink. She was still undecided about what to do, when all of a sudden, Bipul's father turned up on a Sunday afternoon.

"How is it that you came so unexpectedly?" she asked. "We had no idea. Did you suddenly get some time off? You didn't tell us that you would be coming home today," she said excitedly. These questions could hardly conceal the fact that Bipul's mother was extremely happy to her husband.

After dinner that night, Rani and the other children went off to bed. Bipul had come home early that evening and he too had gone off to sleep. Father and Mother carried two chairs out to the courtyard.

For some time they talked at random about various things. Bipul's father asked, "How is he behaving these days?"

Mother remained silent. In the light of the moon, Father noted that for a while she kept her head turned in another direction, her eyes full of tears. Then she wiped her tears with the end of the chadar. Both of them remained silent for some time. Then father slowly began to tell her what was on his mind. He told her that for the past few days he had been very unhappy and that

was why he had taken leave for three days to come home. Yesterday, he had been to the holy mother's place in Polasani village. He told her that the holy mother had given him a few instructions to follow. He had to collect flowers of three different colors and also a little water from a flowing river. The flowers should then be dipped in water. A Brahmin should be called to perform a puja where he should purify the place of worship by lighting lamps and burning incense. After this, the Brahmin should throw the river water on Bipul's bare body. This done, three friends of Bipul must be treated to a good meal consisting whatever items of food they liked. Then Bipul's hair should be cut short and the hair along with the flowers should be thrown into the flowing river from which the water had been collected.

On his way home, Bipul's father told his wife he had filled his plastic bottle with water from a river that flowed through the hills.

Bipul's mother felt greatly relieved when she heard all this. The next morning after breakfast, Father said to Bipul, "Tell your friends Kartik and Mayidul that I want to see them."

Bipul was surprised. He looked into his father's eyes and asked, "Why do you want them to come?"

" I want to treat them to a good meal" said Father. Bipul found it difficult to believe his father's words. "You want to arrange a feast for them? He asked. "What kind of food should we serve them?"

"They can have whatever they like. Don't call all of them. Only three of your friends."

His friends could decide the menu? Bipul was even more surprised. It had never happened before. Bipul asked, "But why do you want to give them such a treat."

Father did not tell him the real reason. Instead, he

made up a story. He said that the day before yesterday he had seen a white haired angel in a dream. This angel had told him to do a few things and get Bipul to do a few others. If they performed these rites, it would be auspicious and bring good fortune for the family. Bipul would become more handsome. He would develop the strength to bring down ten wrestlers and would have the courage to ride on his motor cycle at flying speed. Tomorrow, Father told Bipul he would do all the things that the white-haired angel had asked him to do and Bipul too must do what the angel had wished him to do. Father finally said, "Go and call Kartik and the others right away."

Father was anxious that the instructions of the blessed mother of Polasani village were carried out without any hindrance. That is why he told Bipul what he thought the boy would like to hear. If he got angry and shouted, "I can't do all that," then it would have become difficult for him to have followed all the instructions of the blessed mother.

After about an hour Bipul came back with Kartik, Mayidul and Dulal.

"Has Bipul told you why I have called you here? Tell me what you would like to have on the day we have the puja at home," Father wanted them to have the best treat ever and spoke as if he could get them anything from anywhere.

Dulal and the others looked at each other. They didn't know what to say. Father asked again, "Please tell me what you would like to eat?"

Mayidul looked towards Kartik. Kartik said to Dulal, "You tell him what we would like" For some time the boys kept looking at each other. Then Mayidul said, "Parathas with meat curry would do."

"What kind of meat you would like to have?" Bipul's father asked.

"Mutton would be great."

"What else would you like to have," Father asked in a jovial tone.

"A Plate each of Rasmalai, Kartik said, giving Mayidul a knowing wink and a smile.

"What more!" Bipul's father persisted.

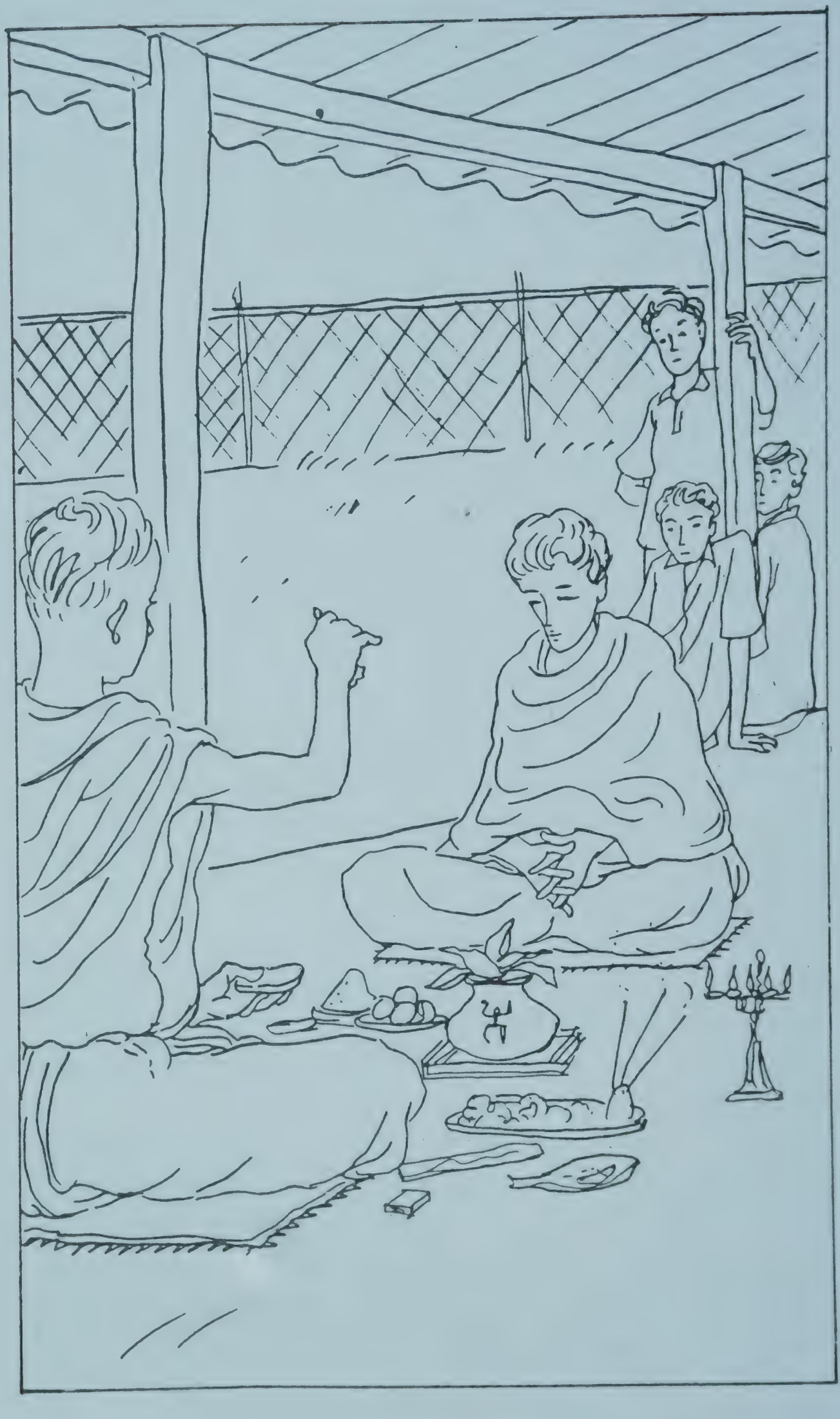
Mayidul and the others were silent. Bipul's father said loudly, "You are strange boys; don't you want anything more? I have given you full freedom to ask for many more dishes but you want only three. That would hardly make a grand feast. But I will add two more dishes to what you have asked - kheer with raisins and sweet curd. Now that would make it a grand treat."

"That's great, Uncle," Kartik and his two friends chorused.

"Alright then, that's fixed. Come tomorrow morning. First thing in the morning will be the puja, then the feast. You will have to stay for a few other things in connection with the puja. After that you can go home. That's all, and thank you for coming. Please do come in the morning tomorrow."

That afternoon Bipul's father bought all the items necessary for the puja. The mutton, curd and the sweets were to be bought the next day. He told the milkman that on the next day they would be needing three more litres of milk.

Early next morning Bipul's mother got busy. The arrangements for the puja and the cooking would not have taken all that much time. She could have gone about things in a leisurely way. But she refused to rest even for a moment and kept running about the house doing one thing or another.



After having her bath, Rani went out to gather flowers. She got white roses from a neighbouring lawyer's house, yellow oleanders from the front garden of the Supply Office and red roses from Geeta's home.

Bipul wore his father's dhoti, securing the garment around his waist and covered the upper half of his bare body with a chaddar. Then he sat down beside the Brahmin and prepared to take part in the puja. Mayidul and Dulal who were watching the puja from a distance winked at each other and laughed at Bipul's dress.

It was not an eleborate puja like the worship of Goddess Lakshmi or lord Satya Narayan. The Brahmin did not have to recite mantras or read from the holy scriptures. All he did was light the lamps, burn incense and give his blessings. The Brahmin finished the puja by throwing holy water and flowers on Bipul's body.

After the puja, the feasting started. Kartik, Dulal and Mayidul sat down to eat with Bipul. Mukul who was much younger sat down on the opposite side. Then they had a hearty meal. Mayidul had eight parathas. Mukul could not take more than two. Rani and Mother plied Mayidul and the others with extra helpings of mutton curry. Dulal had to unfasten his belt in order to eat more.

No one had any appetite left to eat the sweets which Father had bought. Still, Dulal and his friends took a little sweet and some curd. But Kartik could not take any more. "I have had enough,"he cried.

The feast was now over. Everything had been done as directed by the blessed mother of Polasani village. The only ritual left was Bipul's hair cut.

FIVE

When Bipul's father had gone out in the morning to buy mutton, he had asked Bharat, the barber, to come to their house to cut Bipul's hair. Father explained that a small puja and a feast had been arranged at home. Bharat had agreed to come only when he knew that the haircut was in connection with a religious ceremony. He seldom went out of his salon for business except in such rare cases. Moreover it was expensive to call him to the house.

A hair cut in the salon cost four rupees but if he had to go to someone's house he charged ten rupees. And if it was a hair cut in connection with a religious ceremony, he expected to be paid even more.

Bharat had come early in the morning. Bipul's mother served him with all the delicacies. He finished off his hearty meal with some betel nut and pan-masala. By that time Kartik, Dulal and Mayidul had gone home. As they had nothing to do, they decided to leave early. A little way up the road Dulal turned and shouted to Bipul, "Come over in the afternoon." Then they disappeared.

When Bipul's friends had gone, father carried a wooden chair out to the courtyard at the back of the house. Then he said to Bipul, "Come and have your haircut here."

"Haircut? Why should I get my hair cut?" There was a look of surprise in Bipul's eyes. He looked towards Bharat who was standing nearby.

Father came to Bipul and said softly, "This is the last thing you have to do today. Then you can have your bath, and go out to meet your friends."

"I don't think I need a hair cut," Bipul protested.

"You do need a hair cut," said Bipul's mother, joining in to persuade him. "Your hair has become so long that if you don't cut it now it will become as long as your sister's," she said." Boys don't have such long hair," she added, laughing a little to make light of the whole matter.

"No, I don't need a haircut," said Bipul and was about to go inside, when his father said to him earnestly, "Please do have the haircut. We have done all that the angel in my dream asked us to do. All that remains is your haircut. Some of your shorn hair has to be floated in the river and with that we will have completed all the rituals. Don't raise objections now, please let the barber cut your hair."

Reluctantly Bipul sat down in the chair. Bharat the barber had wrapped his scissor, comb and razor in a long piece of cloth. He wrapped the cloth around Bipul and started cutting the hair on the back of his head. Father sat near Bipul and watched.

Bipul told the barber, "Just trim my hair a little, don't make it short."

Father winked at Bharat, implying, "You don't really have to listen to everything Bipul says."

As Bipul had finally agreed to have a hair cut, mother went inside. She had many other things to attend to.

Bharat continued to cut Bipul's hair which fell on the cloth wrapped around the bay and on the ground. Bipul was so lost in thought that for a long time he did not pay any attention to how his hair was being cut.

Suddenly he snapped out of his reverie and called for the mirror. He was very particular about his hair cut and usually went to a salon called Tip-Top, where he would sit with his eyes fixed on the mirror. All the while that the barber was cutting his hair.

Now Bipul suddenly realized that he had not looked in the mirror all this while. He called out to his younger sister, "Oh, Rini, Rini."

From inside the house Rini cried, "What's the matter?"

"Bring me the small mirror!" said Bipul.

In a little while, Rini came running out with the mirror and handed it to her brother. When Bipul looked in the mirror what a terrible shock he got.

"What have you done to my hair?" shouted Bipul at Bharat who was carrying on with his job quite nonchalantly.

Bharat was taken aback but he spoke softly in an attempt to soothe Bipul's feelings. "What's the matter? There's nothing wrong with your hair."

"Do you call this a hair cut?" Bipul yelled. He even used an abusive word and his face became red with anger. Father came rushing up to pacify Bipul. He said, "Why must you get so angry? It's only your hair that has been cut short."

But even before Father was able to complete what he was saying Bipul had caught hold of Bharat's shirt and yanked him up. Father tried to intervene and separate the two but Bipul had already grabbed hold of Bharat's scissors and thrown it with great force. Bharat had managed to disentangle himself from Bipul but the scissors first hit the leg of a chair and then caught him on his calf. The sharp edge of the scissors embedded itself in Bharat's calf and had to be extricated.

Bipul's mother ran out of the kitchen. Father helped Bharat sit down and then attended to his wound from which blood was oozing out. Taking the towel from his shoulder, father wrapped it tightly around the bleeding leg. Bharat's feet had become red with blood. Bipul's mother who could not stand the sight of blood, sat down in the courtyard, her head clasped tightly between her hands.

Rani and Mukul came out too.

"What's the matter? Rani asked and then seeing what had happened, she went to her mother and sat down beside her. Noticing that her mother was upset she put an arm around her and helped her to get up.

"Come on, Let's go inside," Rani said and holding her mother close, she helped her to walk slowly into the house.

The blood from Bharat's cut had seeped through the towel and Bipul's father could see that the bleeding had not yet stopped. He asked Mukul to run out to the road and get a rickshaw.

Mukul did not have to go far. He found a rickshaw at the crossroads and rode back in it to the house. Bipul's father helped Bharat into the rickshaw and took him to the hospital. The doctor on duty at the hospital was Dr Arobindo Choudhury, an acquaintance of Bipul's father.

When they reached the hospital the doctor asked Bharat to lie down on the cot. He unwrapped the towel and examined the cut. "How did it happen?" he asked.

Bipul's father could not bring himself to answer. Instead he looked at the ground refusing to meet the doctor's eyes. Turning to his patient, the doctor, assisted by his compounder attended to the wounded leg. He had just finished dressing the wound when Mukul arrived. Everyone looked towards him:

"What's the matter?" Father asked Mukul anxiously.

Mukul who had run all the way from home was panting as he replied. "Mother is unwell. Rani has asked you to come home and bring with you a doctor."

"What has happened to her all of a sudden? Father asked, not knowing what to do.

"Mother isn't talking. She doesn't open her eyes. Rani said that Mother has lost consciousness. Rani became nervous and cried for help. Aunt came running from her house next door and sprinkled some water on mother's face."

Father looked imploringly towards the doctor.

The doctor responded immediately and asked the pharmacist to keep Bharat under observation for some time. After a while Bharat could be given the prescribed medicine and discharged. The doctor went to his room and washed his hands hurriedly. He grabbed his bag and was ready to go with father.

Father had been so busy in the hospital that he had been unable to come out and pay the rickshaw puller. The rickshaw puller had waited patiently all this time for his money. And now Father and the doctor got into the rickshaw. Father told Mukul to walk home, as there was no room in the rickshaw. But the doctor squeezed himself into a corner and said, "There is no need to walk. There is place enough for the young chap, come on."

Mukul managed to squeeze in between the two of them, and the rickshaw set off towards Bipul's house.

SIX

Bipul's mother had indeed lost consciousness. She had tired herself out with all the cooking and arrangements for the puja. Yet she had carried on, pushing herself beyond endurance, wishing fervently that the religious ceremony would bring about a change in her son. Hoping for peace in her home, she had been very happy to see that everything had gone as planned. But when she heard Bipul shouting and saw Bharat's bleeding leg, her hopes were completely shattered. It was as if she were trying to climb a peak and had almost reached the top when suddenly she slipped and fell down.

The rickshaw arrived at the house. Father quickly got down and ran indoors. Doctor Arobindo Choudhury followed him and immediately examined Bipul's mother. Ranju aunty and others who were attending on Bipul's mother had been able to revive her by the time the doctor arrived. And now she was asleep. The doctor did not give her any medicine, but advised rest.

Then the doctor washed his hands in the back verandah and wiped them with a towel. "Has she ever had fits like this before?" he asked.

Father thought for a while and then replied slowly, "I have never seen her lose consciousness. If she has had fits when I was not at home then no one has told me about it." He spoke in a low voice and sounded anxious. He invited the doctor into the drawing room and asked Rani to bring tea and snacks. The doctor at

first refused the tea but as Father insisted, he agreed and spent some time talking to him.

Father was silent for some time. Then he said, "It wouldn't be good for us if we hide things from you. So let me be frank with you."

He told the doctor about the constant worry that his son's bad behaviour and temperament was causing him. Bipul he said, was not interested in his studies. But that did not worry father too much. When he grew up, he could start some kind of business venture and earn his livelihood. But he had become such a terror that he disturbed the peace of the house every day. He troubled his brother and sisters and Father was worried that he would eventually ruin them. He told the doctor that he could be at home only occasionally as his job was in another town. He had no idea when he would be able to get a transfer back to his home town. Bipul's mother had managed everything at home so far but how much longer could she carry on, on her own. There was a limit to her patience.

Father told the doctor about all that had happened that day. He spoke about how his wife had done everything that the Mother of Polasani village had asked him to do and how she had hoped that this would bring about a change in Bipul.

Father sounded incoherent, almost as if he was sobbing. Rani brought them two cups of tea and some snacks which she placed on a small table in front of the doctor.

Father wiped his eyes with the end of the towel which was on his shoulder and said, "Please have something to eat."

The doctor was staring hard at the ground. He did not touch the snacks, but picked up the cup of tea. He

did not really want the tea at this time, but drank it nevertheless, as Father was so insistent. Then picking up his bag he came out to the front courtyard with Father following him. In the courtyard, Father asked the doctor earnestly, "What should I do? can you tell me, what to do?"

The doctor did not reply immediately. What could he have said? This was a matter concerning another family. He had his own worries, his own family and his work. Even though he wanted to be of some help he did not know how to go about it. But he felt sorry for Bipul's father. He really did want to help. He said after a while, "Let me see what can be done? I'll think about it."

Father felt grateful for the doctor's kind words. They walked towards the gate where the rickshaw was still waiting. Father paid the man for the two trips that he had made. Before getting into the rickshaw, the doctor said, "Can you come to the hospital in the evening with your son? I'll be there then and I could talk to him."

"Yes, I will come with my son," Father replied with great enthusiasm.

The doctor left. For some time, father kept standing in front of the gate. Why did the doctor ask him to take Bipul to the hospital? Was it because there was some treatment for mental problems? After all, hospitals not only treat physical ailments but also mental problems. Perhaps that was the reason the doctor wanted to meet Bipul. Even if he did not consider Bipul's outrageous conduct a mental problem, a few words of advice from the doctor would surely be of some help.

But where was Bipul? He had told the doctor that he would bring Bipul that evening. But how could he do that when Bipul was not at home. After that

unpleasant incident in the morning, he had gone out and had not yet returned. Sitting down in a chair in the front verandah, father waited for Bipul and then went out in search of him. He looked for Bipul in the market place, at the crossroad in Ganesh's shop and in the houses of Mayidul, Kartik and Ganesh. He also went to many other places where he thought Bipul might be, but he was nowhere to be found. When it was well past evening, he went to the doctor's house near the hospital and said to him apologetically, "I haven't been able to find him." He was almost on the verge of tears when he uttered those words.

The doctor understood what Father was going through. Trying to console him, the doctor said, "It doesn't matter. He can meet me some other time."

Father remained silent for a while. Then he said, "Tomorrow I will have to return to work. Would you please keep in touch with my family when I am away?"

"Yes, I will be in touch. But also tell them not to hesitate to call on me for help."

"I'll definitely tell them that," said Father and returned to go home.

When he stepped into the verandah of his house, he heard Bipul shouting:

"When the old man goes back to work then you'll see what I can do. I'll cut your hair even shorter than mine."

Whom was he contemptuously calling an old man? Though Father did not comprehend it immediately, he soon realised that Bipul was referring to him as " the old man." For the first time in his life, someone had spoken about him so insultingly. He was stunned and remained motionless for a few moments before he walked quickly into the house.

In the room he saw his wife and Rani, Rini and Mukul. Bipul was gesticulating wildly with his hands and shouting at them. Father did not want to hear any more from Bipul. "What the hell are you shouting about?" he asked sternly. "Whose hair are you going to cut off?"

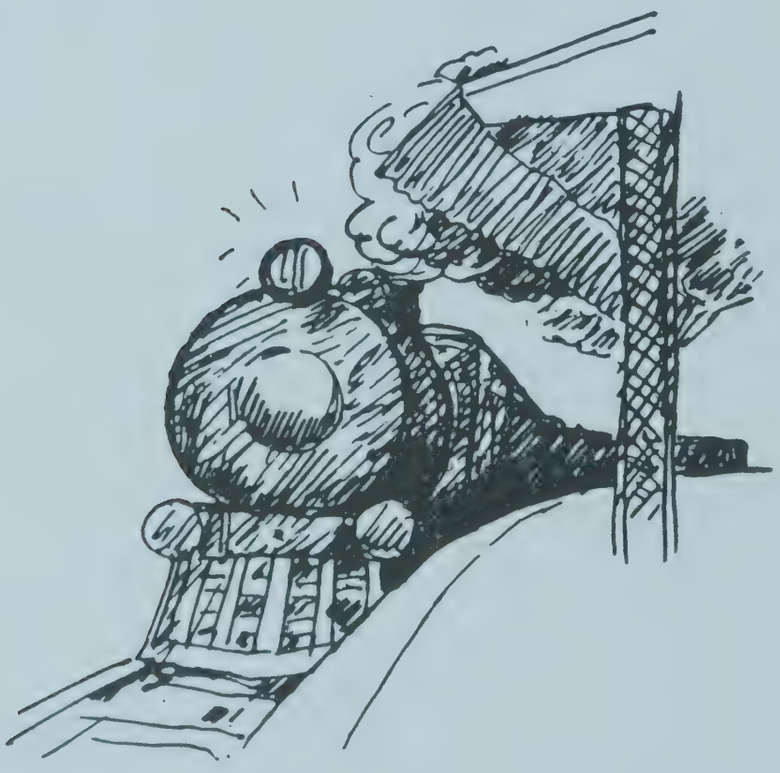
Bipul tried to walk past him. But Father put out a hand and tried to grab him by his hair. He was very angry. Bipul's behaviour made his blood boil. Rani was alarmed when she saw how angry he was. "Father," she cried and tried to stop him by pulling at his hand. Father could not hold Bipul's hair because, it was too short. With one jerk Bipul freed himself from his father's clutches. So great was the force with which he pulled himself away that he struck against a rack near the door. Two clay herons which were on top of the rack fell down and broke. Heedless of the damage Bipul ran from the room and out of the house.

He did not return home either in the day or at night. Next morning, when Father was ready to leave for the town where he worked, Bipul had still not returned. So Father left for the station without seeing Bipul.

In the train, Bipul's father sat by the window of his compartment. Looking out from moving train, the telephone poles, trees, lakes and ponds as well as the cows and buffaloes appeared to be moving in the opposite direction. A few clusters of clouds in the distant sky were moving in the same direction as the train. Father did not notice any of these. Again and again the sweet faces of Rini and Mukul floated before his eyes. He remembered the eyes of his daughter Rani filled with tears. He saw his depressed wife lying in bed with eyes closed and the bleeding leg of Bharat, the barber, who was hurt for no fault of his own.

In the midst of all this, he would recall Bipul's face distorted with rage, his eyes glaring in anger. The running train sounded to him like the harsh, loud bragging of Bipul.

The train stopped when it entered a station. When it started again, the sign boards, the water taps, the benches and the people in their houses slowly disappeared from view. Father did not notice anything. The train stopped again with a sudden jerk. Only then did he come out of his trance. Looking out of the window, he tried to read the name of the station. He remembered something, then quickly got up.



SEVEN

Bipul returned home an hour after his father had left. Putting on his pyjamas and throwing his shirt onto a clothes rack, he stretched out on the bed.

In the kitchen, Mother said to Rani, "Go and find out if he wants a cup of tea or something to eat."

Rani said sharply, "I won't do that. I've already told you not to send me to him."

It was true. The night before while she was cleaning the kitchen, she had told her mother, "I refuse to talk to him anymore. So don't ask me to."

After a while, Mother told Rini, "You go and find out if he wants tea."

But even before she could finish her sentence, Rini said, "I can't go."

And as for Mukul, he had tried to bite off a piece of his nail with his teeth, but in one corner more of it had come off and now it was smarting with pain. In the verandah in front of the kitchen, Mukul was examining his finger but before Mother could say anything to him he walked out.

In the end, Mother gave up and got on with the house work. She did not feel like talking to Bipul either. Everyone felt that since he did not care for their feelings he deserved to be left alone.

But Mother could not ignore him for too long. After about fifteen minutes, on the pretext of picking up some dirty clothes for washing, she entered Bipul's room. He was sleeping with his face turned towards the wall.

Mother did not know if he was really asleep or merely pretending. She arranged Bipul's clothes on the wooden clothes rack, deliberately pushing it around to find out if Bipul was indeed asleep. He did not make any movement. Perhaps he was fast asleep she thought. Maybe he had not slept well at night. She picked up a pair of trousers lying on the floor and noticed that the pocket were bulging with something. The temptation to take a peek was irresistible as the pocket was slightly open. She glanced quickly at Bipul before she took out the contents of the pocket. She found a handkerchief and lots of currency notes. There must have been some coins in there as well because she heard a jingling sound when she picked up the trousers. She found notes of different denominations. Where did he get all this money from she wondered. Had his father given it to him? If that was so she would surely have known. Disturbed by what she had found, Mother gave up. She did not want to think any more about it. She replaced the handkerchief and the money in the pocket and glancing at Bipul once more left the room.

It was one c'clock in the afternoon when Bipul got out of bed. Immediately he went for a bath. When mother saw that he had finished bathing, she informed him in an off-hand manner, "Your lunch has been served."

Bipul had his lunch, changed his clothes and then left the house. All the while he was at home he did not exchange a word with anyone. The only sound he made was when he gargled with water to cleanse his mouth.

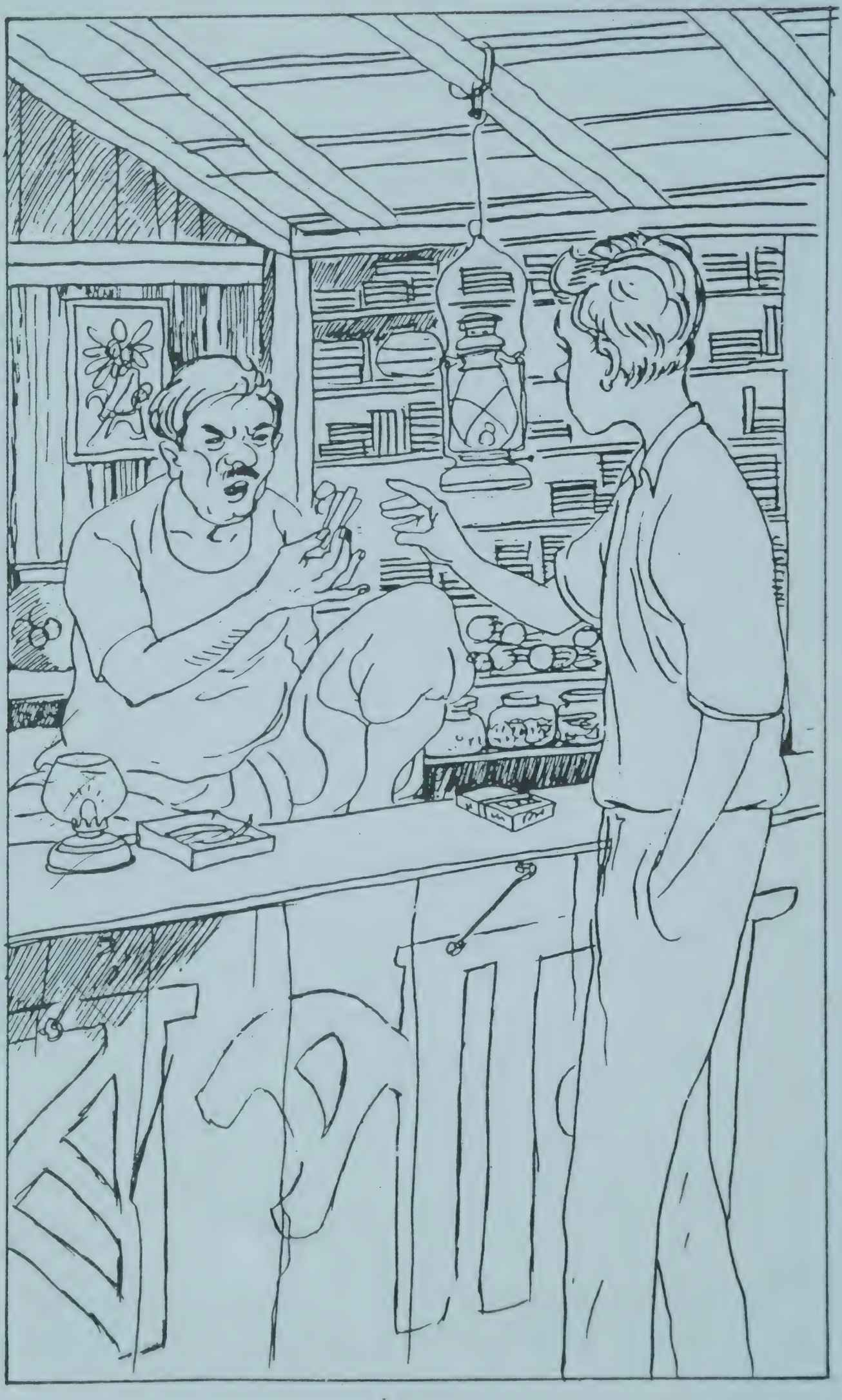
When Bipul left the house he went to meet his friends Mayidul, Dulal and Kartik because he had promised to take them to the cinema. They took in a matinee show and then went to a restaurant to have tea

and mutton chops. It was late in the evening when they came out of the restaurant. They strolled by the banks of the river and later sat down on the steps of the masjid to chat. The day's outing finished they decided to return home. On their way back, they stopped at Ganesh's shop. Behind the shop was a bench made of bamboo. Perhaps someone had set up a vegetable shop there and later moved it elsewhere because of poor sales. But the bench remained and had become a favorite place for Bipul and his friends to sit and gossip. As always the boys settled down on the bench except Mayidul, who was anxious to get back home. "I should have been home by now," he said. He knew only too well that his father and elder brother would be very angry with him if he was late. They reprimanded him and sometimes his elder brother even tried to beat him up. So he always went home earlier than his friends despite the fact that they used to tease him about it. Right now Kartik was taunting him, "Go on, go home to drink your glass of milk like a good boy before it gets too cold. Go on, run, run!"

Mayidul ignored him and settled down on the bench.

In Ganesh's shop a big lamp had been lit to dispel the darkness of the evening. Next to it stood a small, almost toylike lamp that was kept burning day and night. When Ganesh had some time in hand, he would cut empty cigarette packets into thin long strips with his scissors which he otherwise used to cut betel leaves. Cigarette smokers would use these strips of paper to light their cigarettes from the tiny flame of the small lamp.

Behind the shop, it was all dark. The distant street light could not illuminate this spot because on three



sides of the open space grew three big trees which blocked out all the light. The area thus became very dark at night.

Bipul and his friends were talking about the film they had seen. Suddenly, Dulal and the others felt like having a smoke. He walked up to Ganesh's shop and said, "I'd like three Charminar cigarettes please."

Ganesh was taken aback and did not comply immediately. He did not expect such young boys to ask for cigarettes.

"Three Charminar cigarettes, please," said Dulal again.

Ganesh reluctantly took out three cigarettes from a packet, talking all the while. "I am a shop keeper," he said. "It is my job to sell things. I'll give you whatever you want. But you should not ask me for cigarettes."

"Why, exclaimed Dulal, "you should be happy when sales go up."

"Yes, I should be happy," said Ganesh, "but one does not like to sell cigarettes to young children."

Feeling ashamed about selling the cigarettes to Dulal, Ganesh said, "I don't like doing this. I feel terrible giving you young children these cigarettes."

"Oh! you talk more than is necessary. If you don't like to sell cigarettes to us, why don't you move your shop to some other place," Dulal said and lit his cigarette at the small lamp with one of the paper strips that Ganesh provided his customers with. He stood there puffing away at the cigarette between his lips.

Seeing this, Ganesh became very angry. "In future, I refuse to sell you any cigarettes," he said.

"Come on, we are only taking a few puffs," said Dulal trying to conciliate him.

"Don't come to my shop even for a few puffs,"

growled Ganesh, even more angry now.

Dulal could see the anger in Ganesh's eyes and decided to back off. He hurriedly exhaled the smoke from his mouth, coughed a little and left the shop. Ganesh was so upset that he decided to close the shop for the day. Usually, he kept the shop open till about eight-thirty in the evening, but after the altercation with Dulal, he shut shop much before the normal closing time.

When Dulal came back, Bipul asked him, "What's the matter?"

"The shopkeeper has become too big for his boots. He talks too much," Dulal said.

He handed the cigarettes to his friends and gave them a light from his own. Then he recounted all that had happened between Ganesh and himself.

"Bah! The fellow thinks that his is the only shop we can go to," said Bipul and with the cigarette between his lips, went towards a mango tree some distance away, to urinate.

The boys were quite annoyed with the shop-keeper. "Ganesh doesn't know what we are like," said Kartik to Dulal. "If he offends us we can pull down his shop," he said in an ugly tone of voice.

They continued smoking and all was quite. Suddenly someone cried out in the dark, the voice coming from the direction of the mango tree. They got such a shock, the cigarettes flew out of their hands. "What was that?" said Dulal and then distinctly he recognized Bipul's voice crying out in pain.

"Oh! Oh! Don't! Oh, that hurts!"

They clearly heard the sound of a stick being raised and lowered in the darkness near the mango tree.

Dulal and Kartik were terribly frightened. Bipul's

cries of pain turned into a loud wail. And suddenly, there was the sound of someone running away.

"Bipul, Bipul, are you hurt?" Kartik cried anxiously. Dulal called out for help," Ganesh 'da"! Ganesh 'da'!" But Ganesh had already closed his shop and left. Neither of the boys wanted to go near the mango tree.

Bipul's cries became louder. After a while, gathering courage, Kartik and Dulal ran towards Bipul. He was lying on the ground a little distance away from the mango tree. Dulal asked, "Who has done this to you?"

"Someone with a stick. I don't know who. In the darkness, I couldn't tell who it was. Oh! I can't move my leg, it hurts terribly."

Kartik bent forward and supporting Bipul's head and shoulders, tried to lift him up.

Dulal went up to the road and cried at the top of his voice, "Help! Please help us! Someone has beaten up Bipul! Please help."

Dulal's cries for help brought some people running. A few pedestrians on the road and some others who were sitting in the verandah of their houses.

"What's the matter, who is hurt?" They shouted excitedly, crowding around Bipul. Two of them sat down beside Bipul and tried to help him sit up. Bipul couldn't speak, so intense was his pain.

Kartik answered, saying that someone had beaten up Bipul. The crowd was all excited about what had happened and every one spoke at once. Was he hurt badly? Who could have done that? Where has that man disappeared?

Someone quitened the crowd and persuaded everyone to hold their questions for later. The immediate problem was that somebody should get a rickshaw to

take Bipul to the hospital.

Dulal ran to get a rickshaw.

"Water, get some water," a person shouted.

Someone ran to get water from a house across the road. When the person returned with half a bucket of water, another sprinkled it on Bipul's face. Then he tried to straighten Bipul's leg but it was so painful that his whole body shook with the violence of it. Bipul cried out but no sound emerged from between his lips. By the time the rickshaw came, Bipul was almost unconscious.

"Please help me to lift him up," said one man to another.

"Where should we take him?" inquired the other. To his house?"

"Where is his house?" someone else asked.

"It isn't far," replied Dulal.

The person who was trying to lift Bipul said, "It is no use taking him to his house. Let's take him straight to the hospital."

Three men lifted Bipul on to the rickshaw, another sat down in the rickshaw to support him.

"Go, go quickly," the man said to the rickshaw puller.

The rickshaw started down the road to the hospital. Two people from the crowd followed the rickshaw while the others remained where they were talking about the incident.

Dulal said to Kartik, "Go and tell Auntie and the others at Bipul's home that Bipul is in hospital. I will be in the hospital with him."

Kartik ran to Bipul's house. By this time everyone at Bipul's home had heard that something had happened near Ganesh's shop, that something unpleasant had

happened there. That is why Rani, Mukul and the others were standing at the gate waiting for some news.

Kartik came running up and told them what had taken place. Rani cried, "What? Who did that to him? Who hit him?" Then without waiting for a reply she quickly went back into the house. The whole household became a frenzy of activity. Rani's mother extinguished the cooking fire and locked up the kitchen. She quickly changed her clothes and Rani also changed into the first outfit she found on the clothes rack.

Mukul did not bother to change. Everybody was obviously upset. All the while that Mother was getting ready to lock up the house, she was crying, and Rani too was in bad shape.

EIGHT

Four doctors worked in the hospital. When Bipul was brought in Dr. Janardan Nath was on duty. He laid Bipul on a bed in order to examine his leg. A little later, Bipul's mother and the other family members entered the room. They were very anxious. Mother was about to embrace Bipul, but the doctor did not allow her to do so.

Dr. Aurobindo Choudhury's house was adjacent to the hospital. Hearing all the noise, he came out. Seeing him, Mother began to cry.

Dr. Choudhury asked everyone to leave the room and then along with Dr. Nath, he began to examine Bipul.

Dr. Choudhury said to Dr. Nath, "I wished to talk to this boy before anything like this could happen, but he didn't care to come to me though his father had asked him repeatedly to do so."

After both the doctors had examined Bipul's leg, they told the people waiting outside that he had a fractured leg. An X-ray had first to be done, may be then the leg had to be operated.

From the hospital Rini and Mukul went straight to Ranju auntie's home where they would have to spend the night. Mother and Rani would be in the hospital. Though Dr. Choudhury had said, "You need not stay, we would take care of him," but Bipul's mother insisted on staying to look after Bipul.

Anand, Tapan and Mayidul's elder brother Babulal, who had known Bipul's family, came to spend the night

in the hospital. Sitting in the bench in the verandah they kept gossiping about such incidents. After a while, their talk centered on the question, "who could have possibly beaten Bipul so badly?"

Babulal had heard about the whole incident from his brother Mayidul, who was with Bipul when the incident took place. He said, "Bipul and his friends had quarreled with Ganesh, the shop keeper, just before the incident took place. Could it be that..."

After some more discussion those gathered in the verandah agreed that Ganesh must have beaten up Bipul.

The next morning almost everyone began to say that it must have been Ganesh who had beaten Bipul in such a cruel manner. There was no danger of course to his life but one did not know what would happen to his injured leg. This was the general impression.

While he was on his way to open his shop, Ganesh had heard that something was being said against him. But when someone told him directly about it, he was astounded. He looked straight at that person's eyes and asked, "What! I have beaten Bipul! Who could tell such lies?"

Without opening his shutters, he went straight to the hospital. At that time Bipul's mother and the others could not be seen in the verandah of the hospital. Early in the morning, they had gone home. But Ranju, Mukul, and a few others were there to attend to Bipul. When they saw Ganesh they looked in another direction.

Ganesh felt as if everyone standing in the verandah of the hospital took him to be a ruffian. He felt as if everyone was trying to avoid him. They all seemed to believe that a boy who had gone to his shop had an altercation with him and that he had severely beaten

up one of them. It was a lie and he had to put things straight.

He had come to the hospital to tell Bipul's family members that he had nothing to do with the unpleasant incident. But stepping on to the verandah of the hospital, seeing that Ranju and Mukul were looking angrily at him, he suddenly got very angry. It could be that they had recognized him from a distance and were cursing him for last night's incident.

Remaining still for a few moments, Ganesh wondered what would now be best for him to do. In the verandah, he saw a man in khaki dress. The man must be a hospital employee. When that man came near him, he asked brusquely, "Hey, listen, has a boy with a fractured leg been admitted to the hospital? Tell me, where is he?" Ganesh had not noticed that the tone of his voice was one of anger. The man in khaki naturally did not understand why should some one talk to him in such a rude manner.

For a while the man kept staring at Ganesh, then he replied, "He is in room five. But why do you want to know?"

"I want to see him. Can I go in?"

"No, you cannot," the man replied.

"But why can't I see him?"

"That's the doctor's instruction. No one can now visit him."

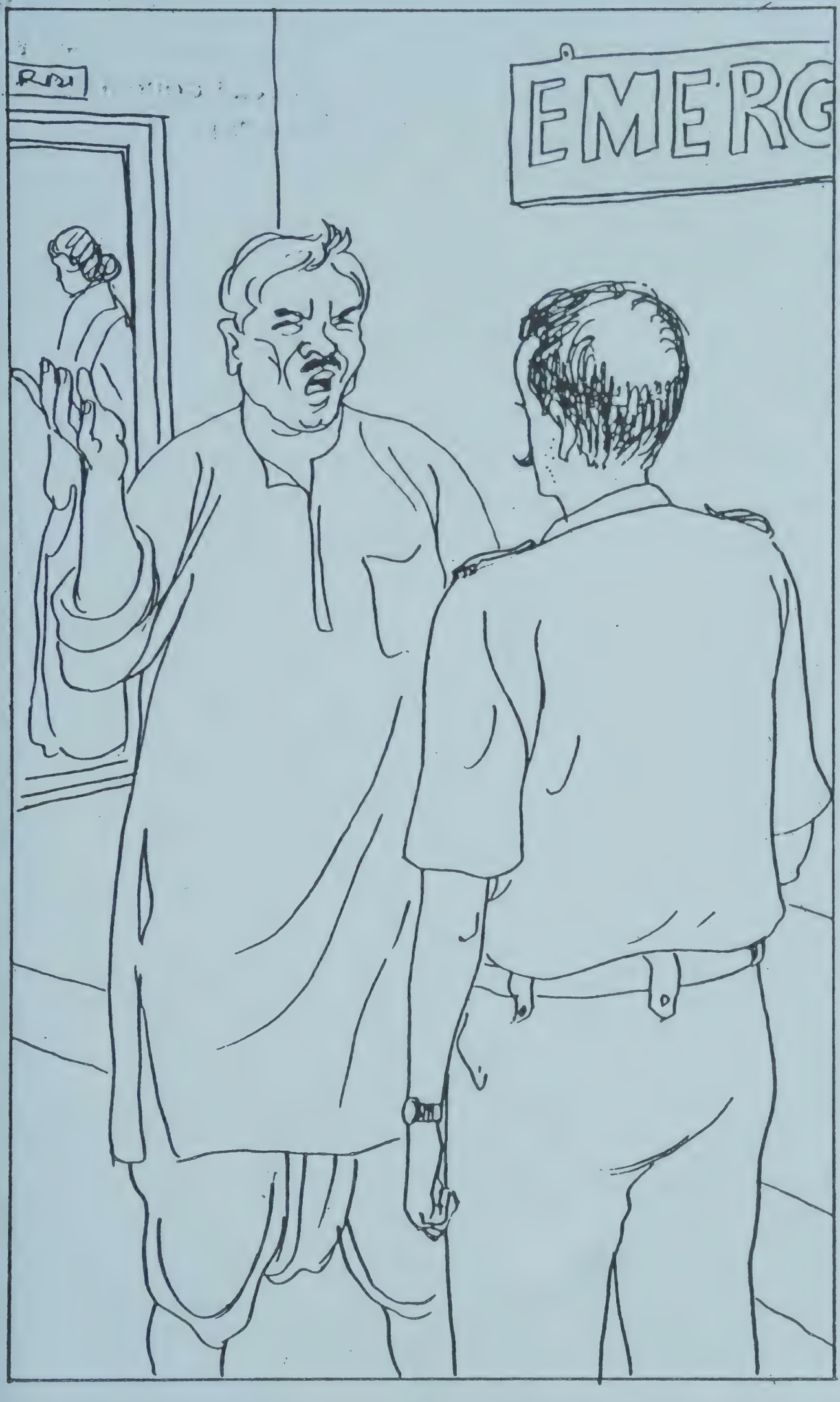
The man in khaki went his way after giving this information.

"Wait, listen, where is the doctor?" Ganesh asked, running behind the man.

"He is at home."

"When would he come?"

"At about nine."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The man got angry perhaps because of the rude manner in which Ganesh had put all these questions to him. He asked angrily, "Who are you to ask all these questions in such a harsh manner?" Staring at Ganesh for sometime, the man went on his way.

Ganesh realized now that without any reason he had spoken harshly with the man in khaki. He thought of running after the man and saying to him, "Please forgive me, I was angry at something else, I should not have spoken so harshly to you." But before he could apologize, the man in khaki had disappeared from sight. Ganesh sat down on the steps of the hospital and waited for the doctor. His head was reeling.

There was a field between Dr. Aurobindo Choudhury's house and the hospital. Ganesh had walked across the field to come to the hospital. He knew Dr. Choudhury. Seeing him now, he ran across the field and standing in front of the doctor asked him anxiously:

"Sir, I have heard that a boy has fractured his leg? Is it true that someone had beaten him up?"

The doctor replied, "Yes, it is true. But how does it concern you? Are you a relative?"

"Sir, I am in no way related to him. But I have known him. His face is familiar. Someone has spread a rumour that I had beaten him up and broken his leg. I can't understand how anyone can spread such a lie. Yesterday, a friend of Bipul came for cigarettes to my shop. I took exception to small boys smoking cigarettes. There was an altercation between that boy and me. Then I closed my shop and went home earlier than usual. That was last evening. I don't know what happened after that. So I don't understand at all why I am being blamed." Ganesh was so worried that he said all this in the same breath.

The doctor said in a matter of fact tone. "If people are saying such things let them say so. Why should you be worried if you haven't done anything." The doctor was in a hurry, after taking a few steps, he said, "All these things can be settled later. Now we have to save his leg."

"Sir, has the leg been hurt very badly?" There was concern in Ganesh's voice.

The doctor nodded. But he did not say anything clearly. He went straight to the hospital. Ganesh stood still in the open field.

When the doctor reached the verandah of the hospital, he found that Dulal and Mayidul's father were waiting for him. They had come to call on Bipul as their sons were his friends. They met Dr. Choudhury in the verandah of the hospital.

They inquired first about the condition of Bipul's leg. Then Dulal's father said without any hesitation, "A shop keeper named Ganesh had done this to Bipul."

The doctor replied sceptically, "I don't know. I have heard people say the same thing. But Ganesh had just met me and he says that he has nothing to do with last night's incident."

"He would of course say that," Dulal's father did not believe what Ganesh had told the doctor. "No one who had done such a thing would admit to have done it," he added.

Mayidul's father asked, "Why has he come to the hospital so early in the morning if he has nothing to do with the incident. He must be afraid, he is the guilty one."

The doctor was getting late. He had come to examine Bipul. " I am getting late. I have to go now," saying this, he rushed to room number five. Mayidul's

father could not finish what he was saying to the doctor.

The father of Dulal and Mayidul were really anxious that their sons should not be blamed in any way for what had happened to Bipul.

NINE

From the hospital, Ganesh went back to his shop. Opening the shop, he went to get a bucket of water from Kanak's house which was near his shop. He needed drinking water and water to wash the betel leaves. He always brought buckets of water from Kanak's house. With a bucket of water, he washed the stool where he kept the betel leaves and the rest of it he sprinkled in front of the shop. When he went to get the next bucket of water, Kanak was standing near the water tap.

After his graduation, Kanak was now studying in the law college. He wished to become a lawyer. Whenever he found some time in the evening he took a few classes for adults who wished to learn to read and write and also attended a few public meetings. Last night he had heard from his mother, when he had come home after teaching at the adult literacy class, that someone had beaten Bipul. A boy in his neighbourhood had told him this morning that Ganesh had beaten up Bipul.

So Kanak asked Ganesh, "What happened last night?"

Ganesh explained everything. He was almost on the verge of tears when he narrated how he was being maligned by some people for something which he had not done. He asked Kanak :

"Do you think I would get involved in such fights? Would I break a boy's leg without any rhyme or reason? Why would I do such a senseless thing?"

For a while Kanak kept looking at Ganesh's eyes, then he said, "Don't listen to what people are saying. If you really haven't done anything, no one can harm you by merely spreading canards."

"But people who have spread this rumour have already done me a lot of harm. I have lost my peace of mind." Ganesh said these words with sadness in his voice.

Kanak thought about the matter and came to the conclusion that Ganesh was right. If he was being blamed for something which he had not done then that was a very unjust thing. Why should he be made to lose his peace of mind for something for which he was not at all responsible?

Ganesh asked anxiously, "Someone might even complain to the police, then the police would come looking for me. Won't that be a very shameful thing for me?"

Kanak became very serious. He was very angry. He said, "Don't you worry. Let me know if the police come looking for you. I will talk to the police."

Ganesh took the bucket of water to his shop. With a downcast mind he sat down in the shop. The customers kept on repeatedly asking him about the incident. He wished he could close the shop and go home.

It was past ten o'clock in the morning. Dr. Choudhury along with another doctor were busy taking X-rays of Bipul's broken leg. People waiting outside had come to know and were saying that Bipul's broken leg might have to be operated. The relatives and friends of Bipul's family had all gathered in the verandah of the hospital. Rani's friends had also come. Some of them were sitting in the shade of a tree in the open field in

front of the hospital.

Bipul's father got down from the rickshaw in front of the hospital. After paying the rickshaw puller, he came running to the verandah of the hospital.

People crowded round Bipul's father. He became restless and asked, "Where is my son? Where is he?" Some people took him to room number five.

A hospital attendant in front of room number five said, "All of you can't get in. Only the father may enter."

As soon as he entered the room, father cried, "Oh! how are you my son?" He was about to embrace his son, but the doctor did not allow him to do that. Dr. Choudhury made him sit down on the stool which was by the side of the bed. Bipul was resting when he heard his father's voice, he opened his eyes and looked at his father. He was so tired, he again closed his eyes. He was pale and within a night his face appeared to have become thinner.

Bipul's father asked his wife, "How did it happen?"

Bipul's mother could not reply to that. She wiped her tears with the corner of her "chadar." Father was also in tears.

Dr. Aurobindo Choudhury said to Rani, "Now all of you should leave the room. Please take your father with you. It interferes with our work if people keep crying in the room."

Rani and father went outside the room. While walking down the verandah, father asked her, "Is his leg broken?" Rani nodded her head in agreement. Sitting down on the floor of the verandah, father pressed his head with both his hands. Someone who knew him said, "You mustn't sit on the floor. Sit on the bench." He took father to a bench. Sitting down on the bench, father kept on lamenting, "Oh! Oh! What a sad thing has happened to my son."

TEN

At about nine thirty in the morning two police constables came to Ganesh's shop. Seeing them Ganesh lost his nerve. The constables wanted to know where was he when Bipul was beaten up last night. They began to cross examine him. Ganesh told them whatever he knew about the incident. Finally one of the constables said to him, "Now you must come with us to the police station."

"Police station!, why I have to go to the police station?" Ganesh was really frightened.

The constable said, "The officer-in-charge of the police station wants you to come."

"Why?" Ganesh's fright increased. He was in no way related to this incident. If he was to go to the police station the shop had to be closed. He tried to explain all this to the two constables but they said they were only carrying out orders. The officer-in-charge had asked them to bring Ganesh to the police station. He must go immediately with them. If he did not comply readily they would be compelled to arrest him.

Kanak was watching the constables talking with Ganesh. He came to the shop to find out what was going on. He asked one of the constables, "What's the matter?"

The constable saluted Kanak. While on duty in some public meetings, he had heard Kanak addressing those gatherings. He had noted that Kanak was respected by many people and that many people were eager to please him. The constable explained to Kanak

that their officer had sent them to bring Ganesh for interrogation to the police station.

Kanak said, "Let me tell you something. You don't have to take Ganesh to the police station just now. I would go with you and explain everything to your officer."

"But if he is angry with us for not bringing Ganesh then what would we say?" one constable asked anxiously.

"Don't you worry. I will explain everything." Saying this, Kanak went to the police station along with the constables.

Bijoy Dutt was the Officer-in-charge of that police station. Kanak greeted him from outside his room and asked, "May I come in?"

Dutt was making some entries in a small note book. He looked up when he heard Kanak's voice and said loudly, "Oh! Kanak, come, come."

Kanak entered the room.

Dutt laughed and said, "Come, please sit down. It is good to see you. Can I be of some help to you."

Dutt was an elderly person. His age might not have been less than that of Kanak's father. There might be a misconception among some people that those who are in the police force are people of an irritable temper. But if they had met a police officer like Bijoy Dutt their views would have completely changed. In Bijoy Dutt's fair round face there was always a smile. But he could get very angry if he lost his temper. Everybody feared him when he was angry. Criminals as well as his subordinates were afraid of him.

"Tell me what can I do for you? Bijoy Dutt stopped writing and looked up at Kanak.

Kanak pointed to the constables waiting outside

the room and asked, "Did you send the constables to fetch Ganesh who has a "pan" shop near my house."

"Yes, I did send them."

"I had told them not to insist on Ganesh coming now with them. Instead I have come with them."

"Why? Did you break that boy's leg?" asked Dutt. He was so pleased to have made a witty remark that he began to laugh heartily. After a while, he stopped laughing and told the constables, "You may go now."

After the constables had gone, Kanak gave his opinion on last night's incident:

" I have talked with Ganesh and I have also talked with a few other people. The incident took place near Ganesh's shop. As he had an altercation with one of Bipul's friends before the incident took place so some people have assumed that he must have beaten up Bipul. I have known him for the last two years since he had put up his shop there. I tell you he couldn't have done such a thing."

Bijoy Dutt reclined in his chair, smiled, and then said, "You don't believe that he could have done such a thing but after serving in the police force for so long, I can tell you that from outward appearances one cannot decide about a man's character. It is difficult to make out who is a scoundrel or who is a decent person."

"That could well be true, but I know Ganesh well. I take responsibility for what I say."

"I know you are a well informed young man so we will keep in mind what you have said. But we will have to make our own inquiries and might have to question him."

Kanak said, "You may do that, but don't bring him to the police station when you are only making the preliminary investigations. People are blaming him just

like that on hearsay. If he is brought to the police station, it would become difficult for him to move freely. So please do keep that in mind."

"Well, let me see what I can do. We have to do our job and carry on our investigations in our own way, but let me see," Dutt tried to reassure Kanak.

Kanak stood up to go. Then he remembered something and asked, "Would you please tell me if anyone has lodged a formal complaint against Ganesh?"

"Well yes, there is a complaint with us which mentions Ganesh as a suspect."

"Who has lodged the complaint with you?"

"Dhananjoy Sarma has lodged the complaint," replied Bijoy Dutt the Police Officer.

Kanak remained silent for while. He knew Dhananjoy Sarma. He was a well known contractor, a rich man. But Kanak doubted his integrity. He asked, "Why hasn't Bipul's family filed the complaint. Dhananjoy Sarma is not directly involved in this case."

Bijoy Dutt explained, "Well, Dhananjoy Sarma told me that the injured boy's father does not live in this town. Sarma's son is a friend of the boy who was beaten up. At the time when the incident took place his son was also in that place. The injured boy's mother is now the only elderly person in their house. So Dhananjoy Sarma came to lodge the complaint and I had no option but to register it."

Kanak took leave of the Police Officer. He walked out of the room but for some time he remained still in the verandah. He was quite disturbed. It appeared to him that the Police Officer did not believe that Ganesh was not guilty. It was likely that Ganesh would be interrogated. But why should a poor, innocent, "paanwallah" like Ganesh be put to so much trouble.

Kanak did not like that.

Within the compound of the police station there was another office. That was the office of the detective agency of the police department. Kanak remembered that his friend Nikunja worked there. Nikunja was two years Kanak's senior in the school but they were friends.

Kanak went to that office looking for Nikunja. Luckily, Nikunja was in his room at that time. Kanak explained everything to him. Then he said, "I don't want an innocent person to be harassed. Please try to find out the real culprit as soon as you can. You have recently joined the police department as a detective. You must get interested in finding out the fellow who broke the leg of the boy. Don't take it only as an official assignment but do try personally to find out who committed the crime? Won't that be really interesting?"

After talking with his friend for some time, Nikunja took up the challenge. He banged the table in front of him and said, "Even though this isn't an official assignment, I promise, I will myself try to find out the real culprit."

Kanak said, "Oh! I am so grateful I would help you in this investigation in whatever way I can."

"Then let us now go to the hospital," saying this Nikunja got up from his seat.

"That's good, let's go straight to the hospital." Both of them then reached the hospital. They had a look at Bipul's injured leg, consoled his parents and then they met Dr. Aurobindo Choudhury. After introducing himself Nikunja asked the doctor, can you tell me what kind of stick was used to strike at the boy?"

"It must have been a bamboo stick," the doctor replied after thinking for a moment.

"Has there been a fracture in his leg," Nikunja

asked.

Dr. Choudhury nodded in agreement.

"Well, when would he be on his feet again?"

Looking straight at Nikunja's eyes, the doctor asked, "Tell me, are you going to investigate the case?"

Nikunja did not want to give a straight answer. He said reluctantly, "It isn't exactly an official investigation but I do want to find out who actually broke the boy's leg."

Dr. Choudhury had met Nikunja before. He knew that he was in the detective wing of the police. The doctor said, "Go ahead, investigate the case. It would be all for the good. But why don't you meet me alone. I have a few other things to tell you."

ELEVEN

That night Nikunja came to Dr. Choudhury's house. In one corner of the front verandah there was a small room which the doctor used as a clinic. Dr. Choudhury took Nikunja to that room and began to talk to him in whispers. Now and then Nikunja asked a few short questions. But mostly he listened. After about half an hour they came out of the room. The doctor walked to the gate with Nikunja talking with him all the while.

Kanak was with him. When Nikunja was on his way to the doctor's house, Kanak said he would wait for him in a bookshop near the hospital. After meeting the doctor, Nikunja came to the bookshop to meet his friend. He had a serious look in his face.

Kanak asked, "What happened? What did the doctor have to say?"

"Let's go?" replied Nikunja absent mindedly and walked on. After a while, as Nikunja had not said anything, Kanak asked, "Why don't you tell me, what did the doctor have to say to you?"

"The boy had behaved in a rowdy manner." Nikunja replied as if he was speaking to himself.

"I have also heard that. But who broke his leg? Did he tell you anything about that?" Kanak was anxious to know.

"Well, there was indeed a connection between his being a rowdy boy and some one breaking his leg. The doctor isn't at all surprised that some one had given Bipul a thrashing. It seems he knows Bipul."

"It is true that rowdy boys must be punished. If some one did something wrong, he must be openly punished for it. But why should he be beaten up in the dark of the night? And why should police interrogate a man like Ganesh who is innocent? Why should a poor shopkeeper be put to so much trouble?"

After taking a few more steps Kanak asked sarcastically, "Did the doctor call you only to tell you that Bipul is a rowdy." There was also a note of irritation in Kanak's voice.

"Well, he didn't really tell me much more. He told me the boy's leg was badly hurt. In such a situation the leg might even have to be amputated. But..."

"What more did he say? Why don't you tell me everything?" Kanak looked at Nikunja, eager to hear more.

"Don't ask me more about it just now. First let me gather some more information."

Kanak understood now that Nikunja did not want to openly discuss with him all that he had come to know from the doctor.

Next day Nikunja met Kartik's father Dhananjoy Sarma. He wished to find out why Dhananjoy Sarma had lodged the complaint with the police even though the injured boy's family had not yet lodged a complaint with the police. Dhananjoy Sarma at first tried to hide the truth by saying that he acted only out of a sense of social responsibility. He said that he liked doing social work. He considered it to be his duty to come to the help of people when they were in difficulties. He had been doing such social service for a long time now. So he considered it to be his duty to find out the culprit who had beaten up Bipul so badly. As he could not do so himself, he had complained to the police.

But when Nikunja was not taken in by all that he had said and began to question him. Dhananjoy Sarma lost his self assurance. The real motive for his complaint to the police became clear a little later when he himself revealed that he did not want his son's name to be involved in anyway with this assault case. His son Kartik was also with Bipul when some one beat him up and broke his leg. Fearing that his son who did not have a good reputation might be blamed for this incident, he had lodged a complaint with the police naming Ganesh as a suspect.

But why did Dhananjoy Sarma name Ganesh as the person who could have broken Bipul's leg? Well, there was a reason for it. He had heard that before the incident took place Bipul and his friends had an altercation with Ganesh who had a "paan-shop". Dhananjoy Sarma hoped that if police kept on interrogating Ganesh, they would not find any time to question his son and his friends who were not up to any good.

Nikunja, the detective officer, after listening to all that Dhananjoy Sarma had to say, asked him,"Is your son now at home?"

"Yes he is at home," said Dhananjoy Sarma, somewhat nervous.

"Please call him."

From the drawing room Dhananjoy Sarma called out to his son. Kartik must have been listening when his father was talking to the detective officer. He came out as soon as his father asked him to come. Dhananjoy Sarma introduced his son Kartik to Nikunja. Nikunja had a good look at Kartik. Then he asked, "What is the name of your school? In which class are you studying?"

Kartik tried to calmly answer these two simple

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questions. But his father noted that even these simple questions made Kartik somewhat nervous. What could have been the reason?

Then Nikunja asked him point-blank, "When Bipul was beaten, how many of you were there with him?"

"Myself and Dulal were with him."

"Who is Dulal?"

Kartik explained where Dulal lived and told him about his parents.

"Would I find him at home now?"

"I don't know," replied Kartik.

"Please come with me. You can show me his house. I could then talk with both of you."

Kartik look nervously at his father. His father looked anxiously at Nikunja. Nikunja, the detective from the police department assured Kartik's father, "There is nothing to fear. Don't you worry."

Nikunja's jeep was waiting. Kartik meekly walked towards the jeep. His father said, "why don't you change your dress?"

Kartik then noted that he was in his pyjama. He went in to change his clothes. His father, sister and brother were all anxious for him. They were all worried. What would happen to him? What had the detective said? They were afraid that the police might arrest Kartik. There was no end to their fears. Kartik's mother was in tears.

Standing at a little distance, Kartik's elder brother was cutting his nails. His mother said to him, "Dulal, why don't you go with your brother."

Dulal angrily replied, "why should I go?"

Kartik's mother began to cry after her son had to go with the detective. She kept on saying, "I had been telling him not to go out with those rowdy boys but he

didn't listen. But I don't understand why the police should take him away. He hasn't done anything wrong." Then she pleaded with her husband, "Why don't you go with your son?"

Things had not turned out as Dhananjoy Sarma had wished. He said sharply, "Please keep quiet, why cry now?"

For about half an hour the whole family quarrelled amongst themselves. All of them shouted and tried to make themselves heard. They blamed each other for Kartik going astray.

TWELVE

Kartik took Nikunja to Dulal's house. Dulal was at home. His parents and sisters were also at home. When they came to know that Nikunja was a detective, who was there to take Dulal to the police station, they got very nervous. Nikunja told them that it was only to ask a few questions. But Dulal's mother was still anxious. She requested Nikunja, "Can't you question him here only. Why take him to the police station?" Dulal's father also pleaded, "He is a small boy. He might get frightened if he is taken to the police station."

Nikunja laughed and said, "No, no, there is nothing to be afraid of. Your son's friend Kartik is with me and they will be with me all the time. I don't see any reason why Dulal should be afraid." Then he told everyone why the boys were being taken to the police station:

"I have to find out who beat up Bipul and for that I have to question Bipul's friends and acquaintances. Won't all of you feel good if we come to know who was the real culprit? Otherwise, people would point out their fingers at your son and say, "He was there with Bipul, he must have had something to do with the crime. Such aspersions would do a lot of harm to your son."

Then he left taking Dulal with him and reassured them by saying, "Don't you worry. I would myself bring him back."

Nikunja, the detective, went straight to the police station with Dulal and Kartik. In Nikunja's office room there was a bench on the side of a wall. Nikunja asked

Kartik and Dulal to sit on that bench. Then he pressed hard four times on the calling bell. He seemed to be angry.

A constable walked into the room making thumping sound with his large pair of leather boots. He clicked his boots and saluted Nikunja. Nikunja said with a sonorous voice, "Please get me a glass of water."

When the constable was about to leave the room, Nikunja said, "I had sent Bikas Babu to inquire about a boy called Mayidul. Please find out if he has come back."

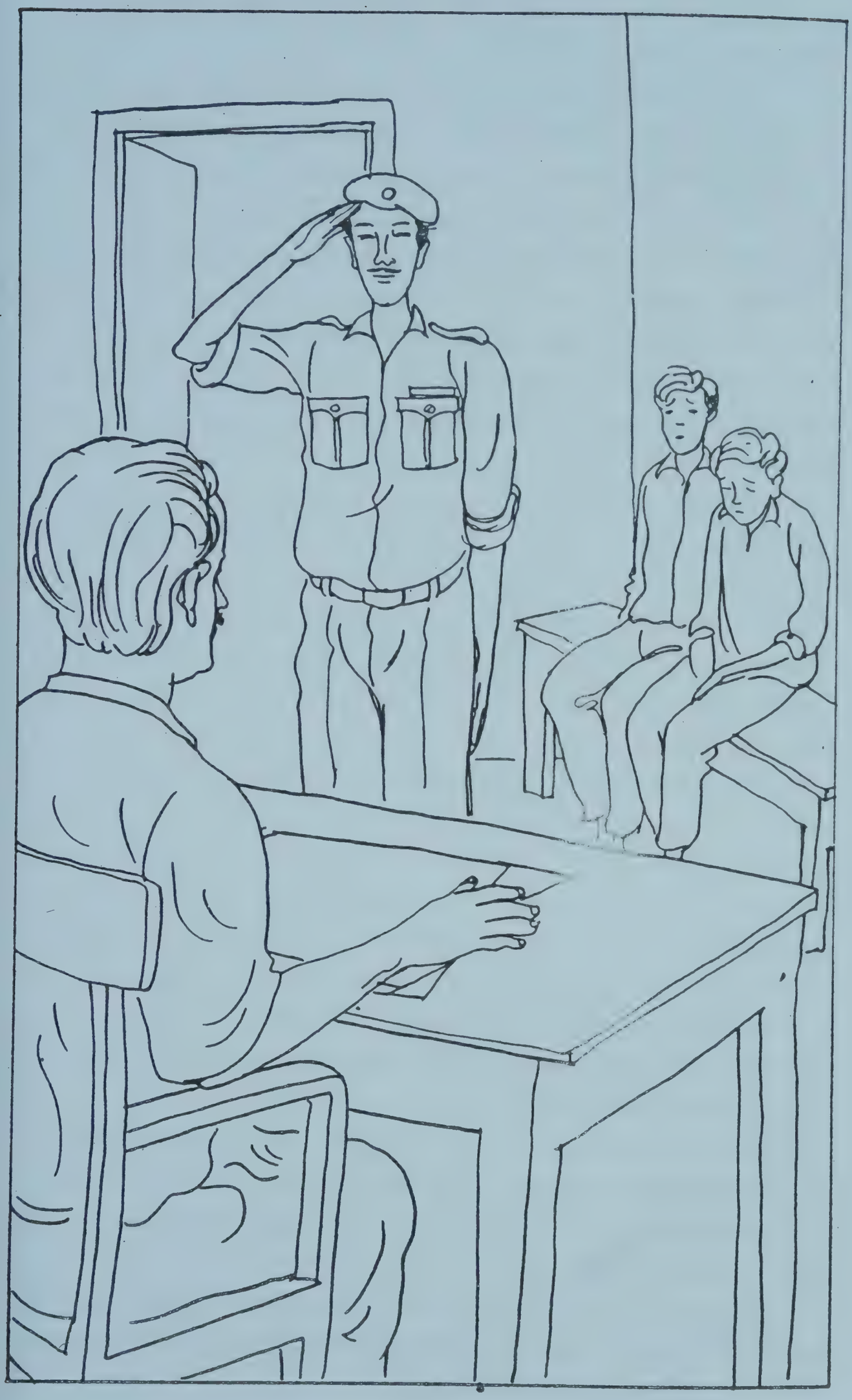
Then with great force he pulled his chair and sat down with a loud thud. His eyes became contracted because he appeared to be thinking hard of something. Then he looked out of the window.

Kartik and Dulal exchanged glances. Both of them were afraid. Then they looked towards Nikunja.

The constable came back with a glass of water. While placing the glass of water on the table, he said, "Bikas Babu hasn't come back." Without showing the least interest in the glass of water, Nikunja, the detective, said to the constable, "Please take him to Bikas Babu's room. Let him remain there till I call him back." While giving these instructions, his eyes turned towards Dulal. It seemed as if Nikunja's eyes had become bigger, it seemed he had discovered something. Then he said to Dulal, "Please go."

Seeing all this, within such a short time, Dulal lost his nerve. He mechanically followed the constable like a toy which was operated with a key.

Taking up the glass of water in his hand the detective looked straight at Kartik. He gulped down some water and then with the fingers of both his hands started rotating the glass like a deft magician. All this



was so unfamiliar to Kartik that he was on the verge of breaking into tears.

"Tell me now all that happened on the day Bipul was beaten up. Don't leave out anything. Tell everything that happened from morning till you went to bed. Tell me one by one all the events of that day. I would ask Dulal also to do the same. If I find the slightest difference between what you say and what Dulal says then I wouldn't allow anyone to go home."

After saying this Nikunja drank a little from his glass of water as if it was hot tea. Staring hard at Kartik, he said, "Now narrate the events of that day."

Kartik narrated his version of events. That day he had gone to the vegetable market to buy vegetables and then he had bought some lintel. After giving these things to his mother, he went out with his friend Ranjit. After lunch, he went to see a matinee show with his friends Dulal, Mayidul and Bipul. It seemed he had forgotten the rest of the events of that day. He first hesitated, but then he proceeded to tell the rest of the events of the day.

After he had finished, Nikunja remained glued to his seat, lost in deep thought. Then he repeatedly pressed on the calling bell. The constable on duty again appeared. Nikunja did not say anything but he only indicated with his hands and eyes that Kartik should be taken to Bikas Babu's room and the other boy should be called to his room.

Kartik followed the constable and when they were about to leave the room, Nikunja told the constable with a commanding voice, "The boys mustn't be allowed to talk to each other."

A little later, when Dulal came back to the room, he saw Nikunja, the detective, twirling the glass of water

with the fingers of both his hands. So far Nikunja had drank half the glass of water. Looking at Dulal with eyes wide open, he said, "Please sit down." He then asked him to give an account of the events of that day from the time he got up till he went to bed. Dulal kept telling and Nikunja encouraged him to tell everything. When he finished all that he had to say, Nikunja got up from his seat. Dulal's heart beat increased with the thudding sound of the detective's footsteps. Looking out through the window, the detective saw something which surprised him. He walked out taking big strides with his large boots.

Dulal and Kartik's father were waiting in the verandah of the police station. Approaching them, Nikunja, the detective, said sternly, "Why have you come? I had asked you not to come."

Kartik's father said apologetically, in a low voice, "We were so worried about the boys that we decided to come."

Nikunja did not like to hear that. He looked grim and said, "I took your permission to bring them here. They have been with me in the police station for only an hour. They are safe here yet you are worried. But when your children are not at home most of the day, from morning till late in the evening, you don't seem to bother. Didn't you know that your sons have been in the habit of loitering the streets, going to places where they should not be? You were not worried then? You should have tried to find out earlier where your children spent most of the day when they were not at home."

Nikunja continued, "You don't have to wait. When my investigations are over, I would myself take them home. It won't be long."

Nikunja briskly walked into his room. The

constable was waiting outside. He said to the constable, "Please call the other boy."

A little later Kartik came in. The detective asked him to sit with Dulal on the bench. He was about to tell them something when Bikas Babu, the Assistant Sub-Inspector, entered the room and saluted Nikunja.

"Sir, did you ..." he asked, but before he could finish, Nikunja said :

"Just a minute. I have to first tell you something."

Saying this Nikunja took Bikas Babu out of the room and whispered in his ears.

"Later, I would explain everything to you. Now I want to get some information from these boys so I am hiding something from them, I told them that I had sent you to get their friend Mayidul. You are surprised as I hadn't told you something about Mayidul nor did I send you to him. I would explain everything to you later, now I don't have the time."

Bikas Babu understood. He was an elderly person of bulky body and a broad smile. He gave a knowing smile as if to say that he understood everything then he went to his own room.

THIRTEEN

Nikunja looked sternly at Dulal and Kartik but instead of saying anything smiled mysteriously. It appeared to them from his smile that he had come to know a lot from the investigations of Sub-Inspector Bikas Babu.

With an inscrutable smile in his face, Nikunja asked them, "Did you meet Mayidul after that?"

"We did meet him one day," Kartik admitted.

"How could that be? You are such close friends, every day you used to meet at some place or the other. How is it that now you don't meet as frequently as you used to?"

"For the last few days we have been mostly at home," Dulal tried to explain.

"Or is it that you have not been able to meet Mayidul as he is in hiding?" The detective said this and laughed as if he knew a lot more about Mayidul than them. Then all of a sudden, he became serious. Enlarging his eyes and moving his index finger, he said, "We are going to catch them anyway. No one would be able to escape. Now you may go but whenever we look for you, we should be able to find you at home. Would you be able to go home yourself? Oh, I forgot! Your parents were waiting for you. You may go now." Kartik and Dulal were afraid of the detective. They quietly went out of the room. Sitting back in his chair, Nikunja at last finished his glass of water. Replacing the glass on the table, he closed his eyes for a few moments. Then he repeatedly pressed on the calling

bell. When the constable walked in, Nikunja said, "Please call Bikas Babu."In the afternoon Nikunja went to Mayidul's house. He only exchanged a few words with Mayidul. Most of the time he was talking with his father.

That night, Nikunja kept thinking who could have possibly beaten up Bipul. Next day, he went early to office. After being in the office for sometime, he went to the hospital. In Bipul's room in the hospital, Rani was talking in whispers to Mrinalini. In the hospital, Mrinalini had been of great help to Rani in looking after the needs of Bipul. Yesterday, she had brought from her home fine rice and chicken-soup. Mrinalini had heard from others that Bipul was a rowdy, but she had somehow condoned his faults because secretly she had a soft corner for him. This could be because Rani was such a good friend of Mrinalini.

With bowed head, Bipul's father was sitting in one corner of the room.

A little later, Dr. Choudhury came into the room with Nikunja, the detective. Rani and Mrinalini stood up. Dr. Choudhury asked them to sit down. A little earlier he had examined Bipul and had done all that had to be done. Now as the detective had wished to talk to him he left the room with him. After a few moments they came back.

Bipul's eyes were closed. He opened them when he heard people talking. Nikunja kept looking at Bipul for some time and then said to his father:

"I want to know a few things from you. It is good if we go out. Let us go and talk in the consulting room."

Dr. Choudhury did not like the idea. He said, "You better talk here. There are too many people in the doctor's consulting room."

"Oh! I didn't know that, let us then have our discussions here only," Nikunja said, agreeing with the doctor. He did not want to embarrass Bipul's father. He sat down in the chair which Mrinalini had placed before him. Rani and Mrinalini kept standing. Dr. Choudhury also remained standing while reclining against the corner of a table. He perhaps wished everyone in the room to hear what Nikunja had to say.

Nikunja looked at Rani and then asked her father, "I have heard that your son has been a very rowdy boy. Is that true?"

Father, Rani and Mrinalini looked as though they were shocked by what they had heard. Bipul averted his eyes.

Nikunja persisted, "We are investigating this case. We have to catch the culprit. Within the last two days, we have been able to gather a lot of information. Now we want to know a few more things about him. Please don't hide anything. I can be of help to you only if you tell me the truth. Tell me about his activities. Rani and father looked towards each other. For some time none of them spoke anything. Father then said, "What you might have heard may not be untrue." He wanted to say something more, but could not bring himself to do so. He took a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. He did not look up even once.

Nikunja looked towards Rani. A little later, she began to speak. Initially, she did not say much, only said that Bipul was in the habit of creating problems at home. She said no one knew why he behaved in such an outrageous manner. But when Nikunja persisted in his questions, she could no longer remain tight lipped. It made her angry when she realized that it was because of Bipul that for so long she had suffered so much. She

became bold and outspoken. It upset her that it was because of Bipul that her father had to suffer untold miseries. She began to narrate all the misdeeds of Bipul one by one. Occasionally, she would turn red with anger and at other times she was almost on the verge of tears. By the time she had finished, she was crying. She covered her face with her shawl to hide her tears. Mrinalini tried to console her by putting her hand on her shoulder. But she herself could not hold back her tears.

Though awake all this time, Bipul remained motionless on the bed. For some moments no one spoke. Then the doctor said, "You all must try to forget the past. Don't we have a saying "whatever happens is all for the good." Now we might have no other option but to amputate one of Bipul's legs. How much more mischief could he do now only with one leg? He would surely be less of a problem now."

The doctor's words were one of anger and indignation. He had heard from Bipul's father about the appalling behaviour of his son even earlier.

When he heard that his leg was to be amputated, Bipul really got frightened. He looked up to the doctor with entreating eyes. He meekly said to the doctor in a weak voice, "Sir, you must save my leg." Bipul must have had a hard time trying to control his sobs. Now tears flowed down his cheeks. Sitting down on his bedside Mrinalini wiped his tears with the towel. She tried to console him by passing her fingers through his hair. Bipul felt that he did not deserve so much love and sympathy from Mrinalini. No longer able to hide his feelings, he began to cry.

The doctor said, "Don't cry, crying won't help you now." Even now there was anger in the doctor's voice.

He had come to know a lot about Bipul's misdeeds and rowdy behaviour.

Bipul stopped crying a little later. Mrinalini was still near him, consoling him with her loving words. By now Rani let a deep sigh, folded her handkerchief with which she had wiped her tears and stood leaning against the wall.

A little later, Nikunja, the detective, broke the silence by saying, "I hope Bipul's leg could be saved. But only the doctor can save his leg and tell us when he would be fit again. But we in the police have been able to find out who broke his leg."

Everyone in the room looked with great expectations towards Nikunja. Nikunja also looked at each one of them but did not speak a word. Everyone was eager to know but no one dared to ask Nikunja who was the person who broke Bipul's leg.

A few moments later, it was the doctor who broke the silence and asked, "Have you come to know who is the culprit?"

"Yes, we do know the culprit," Nikunja, the detective, replied with full confidence.

"Why don't you tell us who is the culprit?" Please do let us know," the doctor could not hold back his curiosity.

"No, I have no objection to telling the truth. Why should I hide the truth. He was beaten up by his friend Mayidul," Nikunja uttered the name without the slightest hesitation.

"Who ! Could you please repeat the name?" Bipul's father cried unable to believe what he had heard.

"Mayidul," the detective repeated the name.

"No, no, it can't be true. Mayidul couldn't have done it," Bipul's father protested. He was restless.

"Mayidul is your friend's son. So you find it so hard to believe that Mayidul could have done it. But we have come to this conclusion only after making some investigations and we couldn't have gone wrong."

"What is the proof that you have to come to such a conclusion?" Bipul's father moved a little forward from the corner of the room in which he was standing.

"We can't reveal all those details to you just now. We will have to arrest him and then he has to be prosecuted in a court. When the case comes up for hearing in the court then we will have to come out with our evidence."

Bipul's father became more restless and said loudly, "The evidence that you may have collected are all wrong. Mayidul couldn't have beaten up my son."

"How can we accept what you are only asserting? Why couldn't he have done it? He is the one who broke your son's leg."

"No, he hasn't done it," Bipul's father asserted with all the force at his command.

"How can you be so sure that he hasn't done it?" The detective looked suspiciously at Bipul's father.

"Well, because I know for certain that he hasn't done it."

"How have you come to know?" Nikunja, the detective, kept on looking into the eyes of Bipul's father without batting an eyelid. For quite some time father stood still, he could not reply to his pointed question. Then he sat down with bowed head in a corner of Bipul's bed. Remaining like that, he moved his head from side to side and said softly, "Oh! Why did things take such an ugly turn."

Everyone kept quiet for some time. Nikunja said to him reassuringly, "Don't you worry, we won't punish

him if he isn't guilty. I would explain everything to you. Please come with me."

Father looked pathetic. He looked imploringly at Nikunja the detective. Trying to take him into confidence, Nikunja again said, "Please come out with me."

Nikunja went out of the room and Bipul's father followed him. After a while, the doctor looked towards Rani and said, "Why should everyone at home be put to so much trouble because of Bipul. One boy has disturbed the peace of the whole family."

The doctor made this comment looking towards Mrinalini. Then the doctor, said somewhat angrily to her, "You bring chicken soup and rice for such a boy. I am really surprised."

Bipul pushed his chin against his chest and tried his best to hide his face from the others.

Trying to drive home the point, the doctor continued, "You love him and want to show your love to him. Do as you like. Doctors are also not without love. But as we are doctors, we have to do with our patients what has to be done and what is good for them."

Bipul could not hide his feelings any longer. He pleaded with the doctor most pathetically, with great earnestness, "Please don't amputate my leg, save it somehow."

"Why, why do you need both the legs? Do you still want to loiter the streets all day long? Are you still interested in smashing tables and chairs? Aren't you tired of all that?" Then looking towards Mrinalini, the doctor said, "I had asked him to come to me but he didn't bother or care for anyone. Then he broke his leg and has been forced to come to me." Looking towards Bipul, the doctor asked, "Why have you come to me now?"

The doctor forgot for a moment that he was talking to a patient.

Bipul cried and said to doctor, "Please save my leg somehow. I would never again be a rowdy. Never again I would be a problem for my family and for others."

Then he started weeping and it seemed that he was really repentant. Then Rani and Mrinalini also began to weep and covered their faces with their shawls to hide their tears. Looking at them for some time, the doctor went out of the room.

FOURTEEN

In a small room in the police station, Nikunja, the detective, talked with Bipul's father. There was only one door in that office and that too was kept closed.

After talking with him for some time, Nikunja began to question him in right earnest.

"That day in the morning you went to your place of work which is not in this town. That very day in the evening Bipul was beaten up. Is there anyone who knows that you left station. I don't mean one of your family but someone else. Is there someone who could tell me that you left for Borapani?"

"Everyone at home knew that I was leaving station. In the evening prior to my departure, I must have also told some other people that I was leaving for Borapani the next morning. But now I cannot recollect their names."

Rubbing his forehead with the fingers of his left hand, the detective tried to remember something and then asked Bipul's father:

"Where were you when you came to know that Bipul was beaten up."

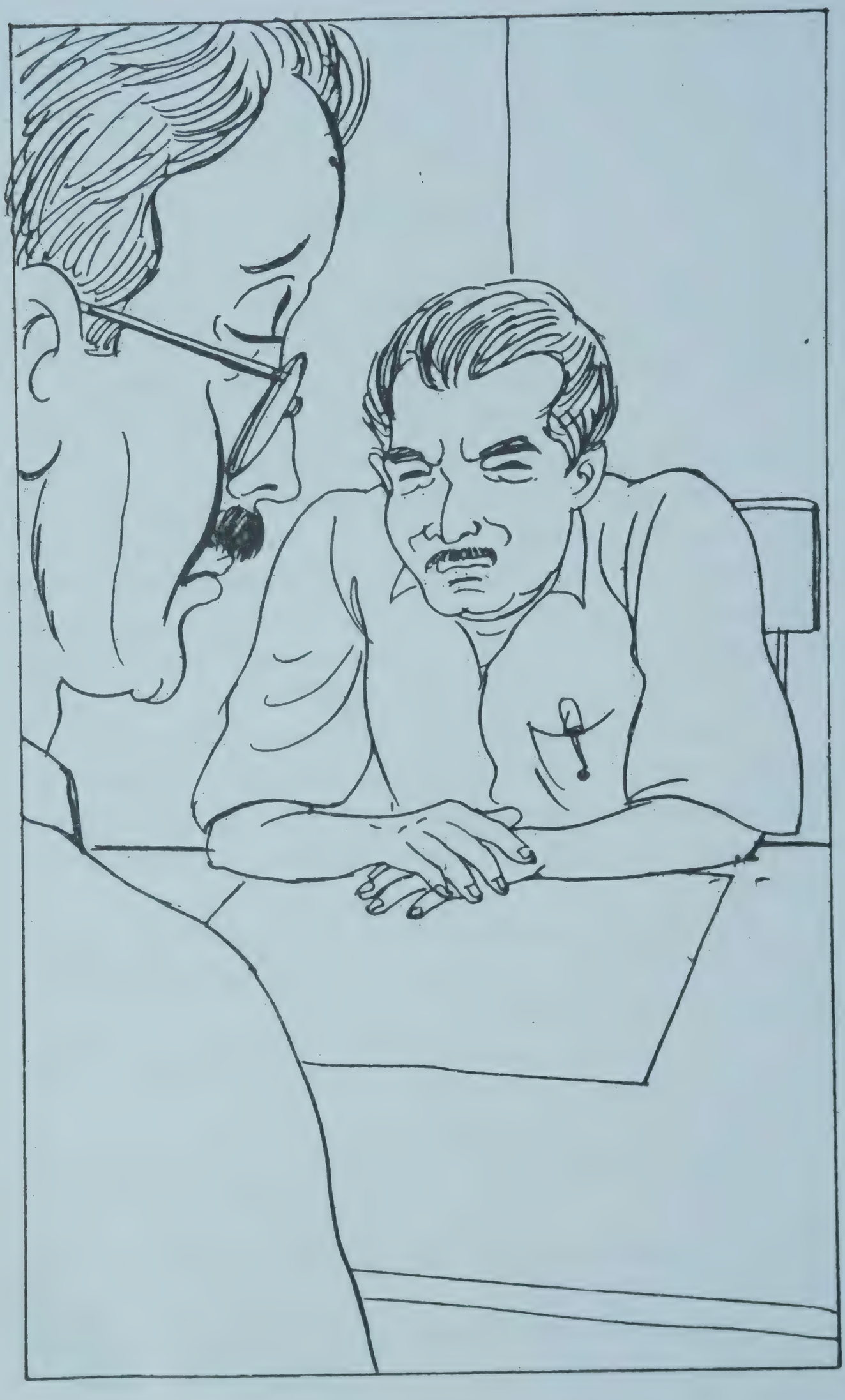
"I got the news in Borapani."

"Well, I suppose that is the place where you work."

"Yes."

" Who first informed you that your son was in the hospital?"

"A truck driver informed me first. He carries coal from here and Borapani is on his way. I know him."



"What was the time when you got the message?" Nikunja kept asking such specific questions and he expected to get unevasive replies.

"I had not looked at my watch at that time. I was sleeping in my quarters. It must have been two or three o'clock at night."

"Two or three o'clock at night! Did he take all the trouble to inform you so late in the night?" The detective found it hard to believe that a driver with a truck heavily loaded with coal would break journey and take all the trouble to look for someone's house so late in the night.

"Well my son was in hospital and people had requested the truck driver to pass on the message to me without fail. My quarters were on his way." Father tried to convince the detective that he was telling the truth.

"What was the name of the truck driver?" Nikunja persisted in his questions so that he could know the truth. Then he said, "Kasem, Kasem Ali, that is the name of the driver." Nikunja wrote down the name of the driver in his notebook. Then he asked, "Where does he live?"

"I think he lives somewhere near Sonapur."

"You are not certain."

"No, I don't know his exact address."

Nikunja closed his notebook and said sarcastically, "You know him so well that even at two or three at night, he takes the trouble to come and deliver a message to you, yet you don't know where exactly he lives." "I know that he used to live in the old market. Only recently he has shifted to somewhere near Sonapur. So I don't exactly know his present address." Bipul's father gave all this explanation so that the detective did not doubt what he had said.

"Well, the day after your son was beaten up, you reached home from Borapani. What was the time when you reached home?" Nikunja wanted to know definitely.

"It could have been ten thirty or eleven in the morning. I don't exactly remember."

"How did you come from Borapani? In what kind of vehicle?"

"I had to walk a part of the way as it was very early in the morning. Then I got a lift in a truck which was going to Arunachal. Most of the way, I travelled in that truck. For the last ten or twelve miles, I took a local bus. But why are you questioning me like this?"

Father felt uncomfortable answering the pointed questions of the detective who did not readily believe what he had said.

Nikunja, the detective, said, "There is a good reason for my asking all these questions. The incident took place on the day you went to Borapani. That very night you came to know about it. It appears that someone known to you beat up Bipul and then feeling guilty informed you about it. On that day in the morning, how did you travel to Borapani?"

"I took the train."

"What time did you reach Borapani?"

"At about seven thirty in the evening."

"Did someone who knows you travelled with you in the same train?" Nikunja obviously wanted to check on whatever Bipul's father had said.

"No, there was no one in the compartment who is known to me."

"Well, this should be enough for today. I will question you again later."

After Bipul's father had left, Nikunja, the detective remained glued to his seat for a long time. He was lost

in thought. Then he left his office room.

On the same day in the afternoon, Nikunja hurriedly entered his office room in the police station and asked the constable to tell Bikas Babu to see him immediately.

Bikas Babu always kept himself ready to meet his boss. Taking long steps and making clacking sounds with his shoes, he came in Nikunja's room. On entering the room, he saluted Nikunja.

Nikunja said to him, "There is an urgent piece of work for you. Please go now to the old market place and to Sonapur to find out where Kasem Ali lives. He is a truck driver. Please bring him to me as soon as possible."Bikas Babu was curious to know what was all this about. Nikunja, the detective, understood that his subordinate Bikas Babu wished to know more, so he said:

"I would explain everything to you later, but first find out all about Kasem Ali and bring him to me."

After Bikas Babu had left, for a few moments Nikunja was lost in thought. Then he pressed hard on the calling bell. When the constable came in, he said, "Please call Sukumar Sarma." Sukumar Sarma was a junior officer in Nikunja's detective department. Within a few years of his joining this office, he had been able to solve quite a few cases.

Nikunja said to him, "I know that you have a lot of work in hand. But you must leave that work for a day and help me. I thought of going there myself to make some inquiries but just now I cannot go out of town."

Sukumar asked, "So you want me to go out of town to make some investigation."

Nikunja nodded in agreement.

"But where do you want me to go?"

"You have to go to Borapani. Please sit down, let me explain what you have to do."

Sukumar sat down and Nikunja, his senior in the detective department, told him in a low voice what all he had to do. Sukumar got up after he had come to know all that he had to find out. He said to Nikunja, "Sir, don't you worry, I will do my best."

FIFTEEN

On the following day Dr. Choudhury closely examined Bipul's leg. At that time, besides the nurse, Bipul's father and Mrinalini were also in the room. Sitting in a chair in the corner of the room father was saying something to Mrinalini. He was telling her that though she was not related to them, she and her family had done more for them than even one's own kith and kin would do. Bipul's father said that their family was passing through bad times. It looks as though they had incurred the wrath of some God. He was sorry that Mrinalini was also put to so much inconvenience because of them. Mrinalini assured the father that she was happy to be of some help to them as her family was very close to all of them. Rani's brother Bipul was like her own brother. Moreover she was so close to Rani that at this time she wished to be with her.

When the doctor was examining his leg, Bipul was looking at Mrinalini. She had not noticed that Bipul was looking at her. After she had finished speaking, she turned to look at Bipul. But then he looked the other way. He dared not now look at Mrinalini's eyes. He felt ashamed for the way he had behaved with her. He used to tease her when he happened to meet her in the street. One day, Bipul's eve-teasing crossed all limits so she had to even warn him:

"Bipul, you must not behave like this. I tell you it won't be good. I will tell your sister how you tease me."

A girl whom he had caused so much pain was

nursing him now. Wasn't that a matter of great shame for him? Such were the thoughts passing through Bipul's mind.

A little later, Mrinalini said to Bipul's father, "We never thought that Mayidul could have done such an atrocious thing. He is mischievous, at times even rowdy, but that he could beat up...

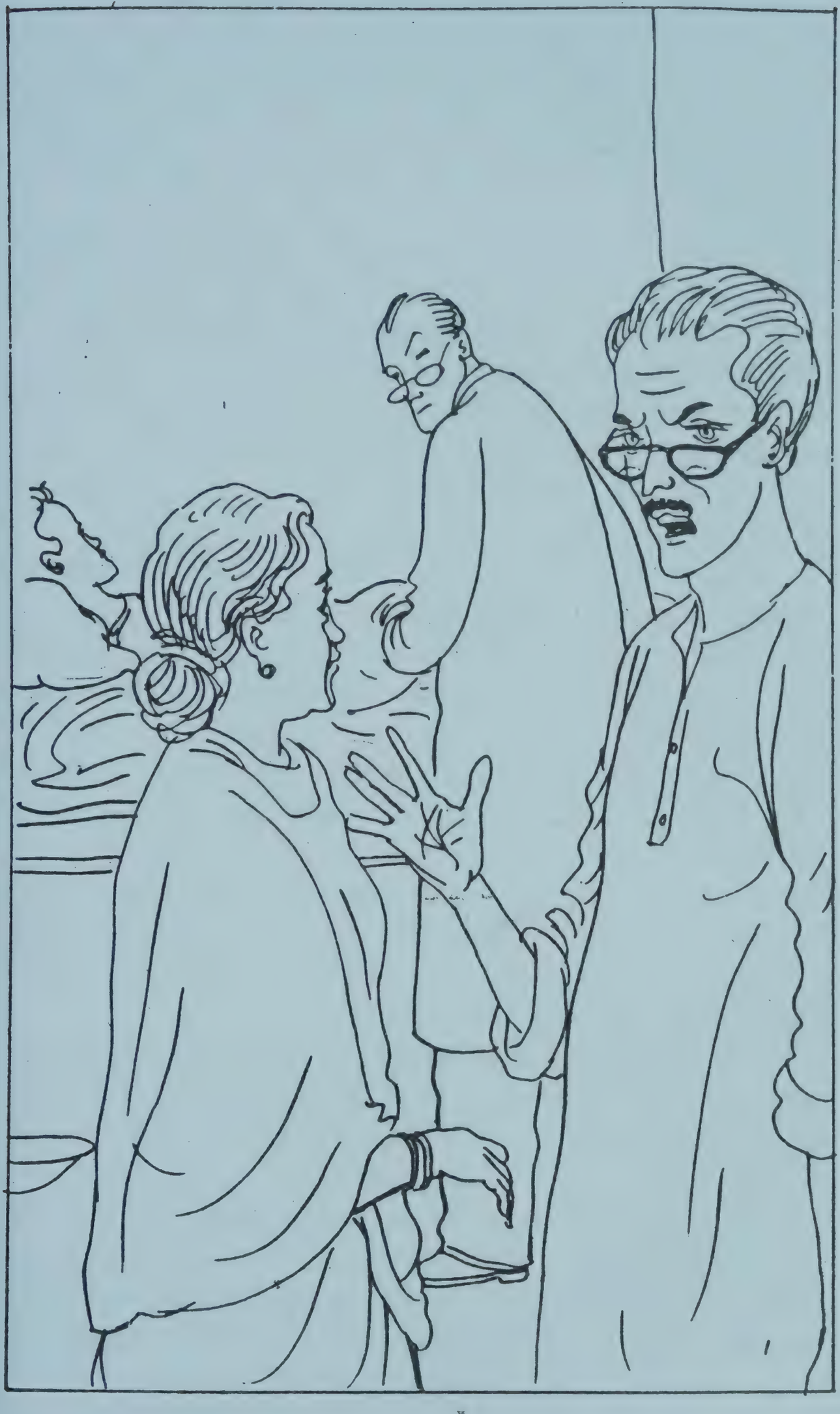
Mrinalini had not finished her sentence when Bipul's father said in a sharp repressed tone, "No, he hasn't done it." There was an air of finality in the way father made this comment.

The doctor was examining Bipul. When he heard the emphatic tone of voice in which Bipul's father had said that Mayidul had not hurt his son, he gave a quick glance at the father and then resumed his work.

Mrinalini said, "But people say that some proof that Mayidul is the culprit has already been found in his home. It is said that a wooden stick has been found..." "That does not prove anything. A wooden stick could be found in any house. Besides we know that it wasn't a wooden but a bamboo stick which was used to beat up Bipul. How could anyone take a stick to beat up someone and them bring back the same stick to his home? Can such a thing happen? Some hardened criminals might be able to behave like that but not a small boy." Bipul's father said all this with great anger. He remained sullen for sometime and then looked towards the doctor.

By this time the doctor had finished the examination of Bipul's leg. He now stood up lost in thought.

Father asked, "Sir, how is his leg now?" The doctor took a deep sigh and said, "Yes, it is a lot better now. But we would have to do the operation tomorrow."



With a voice full of distress, Bipul said, "Sir, I find the pain subsiding now."

"Yes, the pain would naturally subside. You have taken so many tablets and injections in. But the injury to your leg is internal and we can only tell what has to be done."

Saying these words in a very casual way the doctor went out of the room. Telling Mrinalini to give Bipul a tablet after every half an hour, the nurse gave an enigmatic smile and left.

Mrinalini had smiled back at the nurse but the smile soon disappeared when she found to her great surprise that Bipul was weeping. When she went near him, he started crying like a child.

"Why do you cry so much," Mrinalini asked moving her fingers through his hair.

Looking at them for sometime Bipul's father went out of the room. He could not come to see his son so broken down.

After a while Bipul stopped crying. Mrinalini wiped his tears. Then she came out of the room to look at the street as far as she could gaze. Rani should have been here by now. While she was standing in the verandah she found that the same nurse was passing by. She turned towards the nurse and asked, "Sister, Bipul does not stop crying."

The nurse said, "Let him cry. He isn't crying because of the pain in the leg, but because he feels so repentant." Making a clicking sound with her heels, the nurse went on her way.

The next day in the forenoon, Nikunja was pacing in his office room. Bikas Babu was standing near the table. A little earlier, he had informed Nikunja that in the old market and in the whole of Sonapur area, he

had met more than a hundred and twenty people connected with the transport business but no one knew a truck driver by the name of Kasem Ali. He had however, met a man whose name was Kasem in the old market area and two men by such a name in Sonapur. But one of them used to sell eggs, the other made quilt and the third one worked as a peon in a school. They had nothing to do with trucks.

Moreover, in both the places, many people had asserted that there was no truck driver by such a name. The people in these areas knew each other very well. They even knew the names of strangers who came to their areas only for a few days.

Then what could be the matter, Nikunja was really surprised.

But the next day in the afternoon, he was stunned beyond words. After making investigations in Borapani, Sukumar came to tell him that Bipul's father had not gone to Borapani on that day. He found this out from a government employee who was a neighbour of Bipul's father in Borapani. He was a good friend of father. After locking his house a few days back, father had left the key with this employee. Since then father had not returned to Borapani. The key was still with that neighbour. So Bipul's father had not returned to Borapani from the time he had gone home for the religious ceremony. Father had sent a telegram to his office at Borapani to extend his leave. That telegram had been received by his office. Sukumar had gathered all this information in Borapani.

It had now become quite clear that Bipul's father had not gone to Borapani after the religious ceremony. But he had said that after the religious ceremony, he had gone for a day to Borapani. He had said that on the

day after the religious ceremony, he had reached Borapani at seven thirty in the evening. He had also said the truck driver Kasem Ali had informed him at two or three at night that his son was in the hospital. Then he had immediately left Borapani to reach home in the morning. So was all this a made up story. Had Bipul's father lied to the detective? But why?

SIXTEEN

For more than an hour Nikunja sat in his office. He went towards the window now and then and at other times he kept drawing lines on a piece of paper. For a while, he kept twirling his hair with his finger then he asked the constable to get him a cup of tea. All of a sudden he went out of his room. The office jeep was not available to Nikunja so he called out to a rickshaw puller who was sitting idly on his rickshaw under the shade of a tree. When the Rickshaw came to him he quickly jumped on to the seat and asked him to take him to the civil hospital.

Dr. Choudhury was looking closely at a report in the pathological laboratory. Nikunja at last found him there.

"Dr. Choudhury, I would like to talk to you." Nikunja looked grave, he had to discuss something serious with the doctor.

Dr. Choudhury noted the sense of urgency in Nikunja's voice so he replaced the pathological report in his file and took the detective to his room.

When they were in the room, Nikunja asked directly, "You had told me the other day that Bipul's father was a straight forward good man?"

"Yes, that was my impression when he came to me for help and advice. But what's the matter? Did I say anything wrong?"

"I am some what puzzled. We find that we cannot take him at his word. There are serious discrepancies

in the statements that he has made to us. So we would have to cross examine his statements to sort out matters. We did not like to disturb him when his son was just admitted to the hospital. But now we have to properly cross examine him to know about the culprit. We can't make any headway on our investigations without doing that. Though this case doesn't fall under the category of serious crime, I have somehow got so involved with the case that I have to solve it now. I would like to know when you are going to do the operation to amputate Bipul's leg? It has become necessary for our investigations to know the date of the operation."

Dr. Choudhury kept looking at Nikunja for a moment, then he got up and bolted the door so that no one could come in. He did not go back to his chair but sat down in a chair which was close to that of Nikunja. Then he began to explain in a low voice the condition of Bipul's leg.

The detective went looking for Bipul's father after leaving Dr. Choudhury's room. Father was sitting in a chair in the corner of Bipul's room Nikunja asked him to come outside. Walking in the verandah for a little while, Nikunja, the detective, stopped in the passage between two rooms. With eyes fixed on Bipul's father, in a low, but firm voice, he asked:

"We have found a wooden stick in Mayidul's house but how have you come to know that Bipul was beaten with a bamboo stick?"

Father was taken aback. With a blank look, he kept staring at Nikunja's eyes.

"How did you come to know," Nikunja asked in a stern voice.

"Well, I... I..." Bipul's father faltered.

"The doctor had heard you say so. I have come to

know from him. You told Mrinalini that Bipul was beaten with a bamboo stick. I would like to know, how you came to know that?"

Bipul's father got the shock of his life. He felt as if all his limbs were in a shudder. His eyes became larger and his nose was quivering. He was visibly shaking with fear.

"You have to come with me," saying this Nikunja went ahead. Bipul's father kept standing at the same place. After taking a few steps, Nikunja looked back. He shouted, "Follow me." Bipul's father walked slowly towards him like a man at his wits end.

At about eight o'clock that evening, the detective himself met Bipul's mother and told her that father would not come home that night. He had to accompany a police man who had to go on an urgent piece of work in connection with the investigation of Bipul's case. The bedding and the clothes which he would need for the night would be provided to him. So she need not worry.

The next morning, Nikunja was late in reaching his office. He had gone to bed late.

While going to the police station, he stopped his jeep near Kanak's house and looked for him. Kanak was at home. Nikunja called him, "How are you and how is your social work getting along. You are really no ordinary person!" Nikunja had spoken in a half taunting half jocular manner to his friend. Kanak looked as though he could not understand why his friend had spoken to him in that manner.

"What's the mater? What have I done? Please let me know."

"It seems you have forgotten everything. Someone broke a boy's leg and entrusting me to investigate the case, you forgot about it completely. Do you remember

now? You should have come to me later to find out if I had any difficulty in pursuing the case."

Kanak understood why his friend had spoken to him in that tone. He had to make an excuse.

"Oh! I am very sorry, I was awfully busy for the last few days."

"Well, I can understand that in these few days you did not find any time to spare for me. But you must come to the hospital at five this evening. If you want to know who broke Bipul's leg, please come to the hospital at five this evening. Don't fail to come."

"Have you found the culprit? Do let me know?" Kanak asked with great curiosity.

"No, I can't tell you anything now. Do come to the hospital sharp at five." Nikunja went off in his jeep without telling Kanak who was the culprit.

At five in the evening the hospital was less crowded than at other time. Anyway in the evenings usually there were not many people in the hospital. Even then Dr. Choudhary instructed the attendant not to allow more people to enter Bipul's room. By this time, Mrinalini, Rani, Bipul's parents, Kanak and Nikunja were already in the room. After instructing the staff the doctor also entered the room. He closed the door as soon as he entered. Rani and Mrinalini were surprised that the doctor had allowed so many people to be present in the room on that day whereas on other days he used to insist that not many people should be present in the patient's room. They were more surprised when the doctor bolted the door from inside. They touched each others hands to indicate that they both expected some important revelations to be made.

For sometime no one spoke a word. Then the detective, Nikunja said, "It is good that all of you are

here to listen to certain things which we have come to know in the course of our investigations. If you have anything to say then you must speak out openly. We in the police department have now come to know who broke Bipul's leg."

Rani and Mrinalini looked towards Nikunja with great eagerness to know the name of the culprit. Kanak asked his friend, the detective, to tell them the name of the culprit. Nikunja spoke and everyone listened to him in silence:

"I would give out the name a little later. First, I would like to know something from Dr. Choudhary. He had always been telling us since Bipul was admitted to the hospital that his leg had to be operated upon and also said that the lower portion of his leg had to be amputated. But he told me yesterday that Bipul's leg was not in such a bad shape and that all these days he had been telling us a lie. The injury to Bipul's leg was not very serious. He could be discharged if he wished to go home. If that is so, why then did the doctor hide the truth from us for so long?"

Seventeen

Everyone in the room looked towards the doctor. For sometime the doctor's eyes were fixed on the ground, then he said, "Yes, I had to tell a few lies but there was a good reason for doing so. Bipul's father had taken me into confidence regarding his son's rowdy behaviour. He had come to me for help but his son didn't care to come to me for advice as arranged by his father. I was angry and at the same time I pitied him. I felt somewhat humiliated but I let that pass. When he came to my hospital with an injured leg then I thought I must teach him a lesson. I decided I would keep him here as long as a change of heart did not come about in him. I wanted him to feel sorry and repentant for his acts of rowdyism."

The doctor waited for a few moments, then he again began to speak: "In the last four days, I am seeing that a change has come about in Bipul. He cries and feels repentant for his past behaviour. In the last few days he had been saying that in future he would never behave in a rowdy manner as he had done in the past. My telling a harsh lie that his leg had to be amputated had a salutary effect on him. I thought a few more days of anxiety would have made him more repentant and would have perhaps ensured that there has really been a change of heart. I wanted him to go out of the hospital a changed boy who would not be a problem for his family. Things were going as I had planned but as the police was investigating the case the whole matter has

taken a different turn which I had not anticipated." The doctor then looked towards Nikunja, the detective, as he had nothing more to say.

Now Nikunja began to speak: "Well, we have heard what the doctor had to say. He took all the trouble to make Bipul a good and he even had to tell a lie for that. Has Bipul realized that he has caused so much trouble to so many people?"

Nikunja had spoken in a taunting manner to see how Bipul reacted. Bipul was looking down, he felt so ashamed. He was feeling so very miserable, he wished to hide his face.

"But we in the police got into all this investigation only to find out who was the real culprit and we have found that out now," Nikunja said, in a cold hearted way. Everyone in the room was jolted by the news. Nikunja said, "Let me explain. We in the police have ways in which we go about our business. Sometimes, when we don't find any clue which we can follow, then we just name someone guilty and wait to see how the others react to it. In this case, we spread the word that Mayidul is the culprit though we knew he hadn't beaten Bipul. We assured Mayidul and his father that they need not worry. We were only taking their help to find the real culprit. We advised Mayidul to stay at home for a few days or go to one of his relatives. As we declared that Mayidul was the culprit everyone believed in it except for one man."

Nikunja pointed out that person was none other than Bipul's father. Then Nikunja went on to say, "Bipul's father had insisted more than once that Mayidul hadn't done it. We became suspicious how could he be so sure that Mayidul hadn't done it? We became more suspicious after we questioned him. He must have

known who was the real culprit so he didn't want an innocent boy like Mayidul to be punished for something which he hadn't done."

Nikunja remained quiet for a while. Then he continued, "Bipul's father is no doubt a very simple man. I do believe that he is a straight forward person. He isn't at all secretive by nature. More we talked with him more we came to know about Bipul's case. We found later that he was trying to hide something and to do that he was telling us a made up story. We all know that on the day Bipul was beaten up, his father had left in the morning for his place of work, Borapani. It is also true that he had boarded the train, but he didn't go upto Borapani. Whatever he said to us about his going to his place of work Borapani on the day his son was beaten up on the evening was all made up. When we came to know in the course of our investigations that he had lied about going to his place of work Borapani, then we were placed in a very difficult situation. We didn't know why he had told us such a blatant lie. Subsequently we came to know that he even knew with what stick Bipul was beaten up. He had said very emphatically to Mrinalini in the hospital that Bipul was beaten up with a bamboo stick and not a wooden stick. Last night when we interrogated him in the house of a police official, he confessed everything."

Waiting for a while, Nikunja said, "I have told you before that he is a very straight forward person. But he isn't shrewd enough to hide things. Last night he admitted that he boarded the train that morning but did not go upto Borapani. He got down at a station midway and took another train to return home. He reached his home town a little before evening. While looking for Bipul to find out how he spends his time,

he found him smoking with his friends. This infuriated him so much that in the darkness of the mango grove, he beat his son severely on the leg. Then he spent the night in a hotel near the Railway Station of his home town. Next day, he went to the hospital when he heard that his son was badly hurt and had been admitted there."

Nikunja did not have more to say. All the people in the room were struck dumb by what they had heard. They could not believe it. They kept looking towards Nikunja, the detective, who had come out with such an astounding revelation. Bipul's father stood there with bowed head.

"Father had to beat up his own son like that? What could have been the reason? He would tell that to you himself." Nikunja looked towards Bipul's father requesting him to reveal the truth.

Bipul's father stood motionless. Nikunja said, "Please speak, there is no point in keeping quiet now."

Bipul's father slowly raised his head. He wiped his eyes with a corner of his long shirt. Then he slowly began to speak.

"I work in a place which is far away from my home. Bipul is my eldest son. I have provided him with all that he needs. I am not a rich man but I have seen to it that he does not lack anything. At times I have even deprived my other children of certain things which I have made available to him to keep him happy. I thought that by giving presents if I could keep him happy, he would study well and become a good boy. But I did not realize then that by pampering him I was only spoiling him. However much we tried to go out of our way to meet his demands, he became more of a rowdy boy. The money which I gave him to buy books,

he spent it on cigarettes. Not only has he gone astray but he has also disturbed the peace of our home. It was hard to bear such pain and so much of unhappiness from one's own child. It had become difficult for me to face people as there were so many complaints against him. He would not listen to any advice but would only brag before his mother. He even brags before me and does not at all care for the feelings of his brother or sister. He always wants to dominate over others. With such a boy in the house, how could I live and work in peace at a distant place? Sometimes, we even begin to feel that it is better not to have such a son. Yet, we couldn't stop loving him and I got him the best of things."

Wiping his eyes, Bipul's father continued, "I had reached the limits of my patience this time. I could not bear it any longer. That day, he threatened his mother that after the 'old man' - his father - that is myself, go to Borapani, he would cut off her hair. Tell me, how much more humiliation could I bear?"

Waiting for a while, he continued, "That day when I had boarded the train to Borapani, I was very restless. I was worried that he might behave in a rowdy manner after I leave home. His anger at his hair shorn if he takes it out on his sisters or mother than what would happen? Who knows he might again beat up the barber. With all these worries on my head, I could not proceed to my place of work at Borapani. I got down from the train to return home. By the time I reached my home town, it was evening and I decided to look for Bipul before I went home. I was able to find him with his friends. In the dark, I followed him at a distance. When I saw him smoking, I lost my balance of mind. I don't remember when I picked up that piece of bamboo. With that I

thrashed him in the leg with all my might."

Bipul's father looked down, he stood there as a guilty person. Then one could hear the sound of weeping. It was Bipul who was weeping. No one knew what to say to him how to console him. Bipul's mother and Rani had covered their faces with their shawls. They were also crying. Turning towards the wall, Mrinalini was wiping off her tears.

Bipul sat up on the bed. He tried to get up, perhaps he wished to do something. The doctor understood, he helped Bipul to get down from the bed. Though Bipul was still crying he was keen to do something.

Bipul went to his father and fell down at his feet. He began to cry. Rani and mother also could not control their sobs.

When a patient dies the relatives cry. Their crying can often be heard in hospitals. People might have thought someone must have died in that room. The doctor came out of Bipul's room to tell the people outside the room that no such thing has happened. No death had occurred. The attendant standing in the verandah wished to know what was then all the crying for. He did not actually ask but there was a questioning look in his glance. The doctor assured him with a smile, "There is nothing to worry. The patient is recovering from his illness. Bipul is crying because he is repentant. He wants to be a good boy." The attendant smiled back at the doctor.

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